MATILDA WALTZES WITH THE TOMMIES

MARY KENT HUGHES

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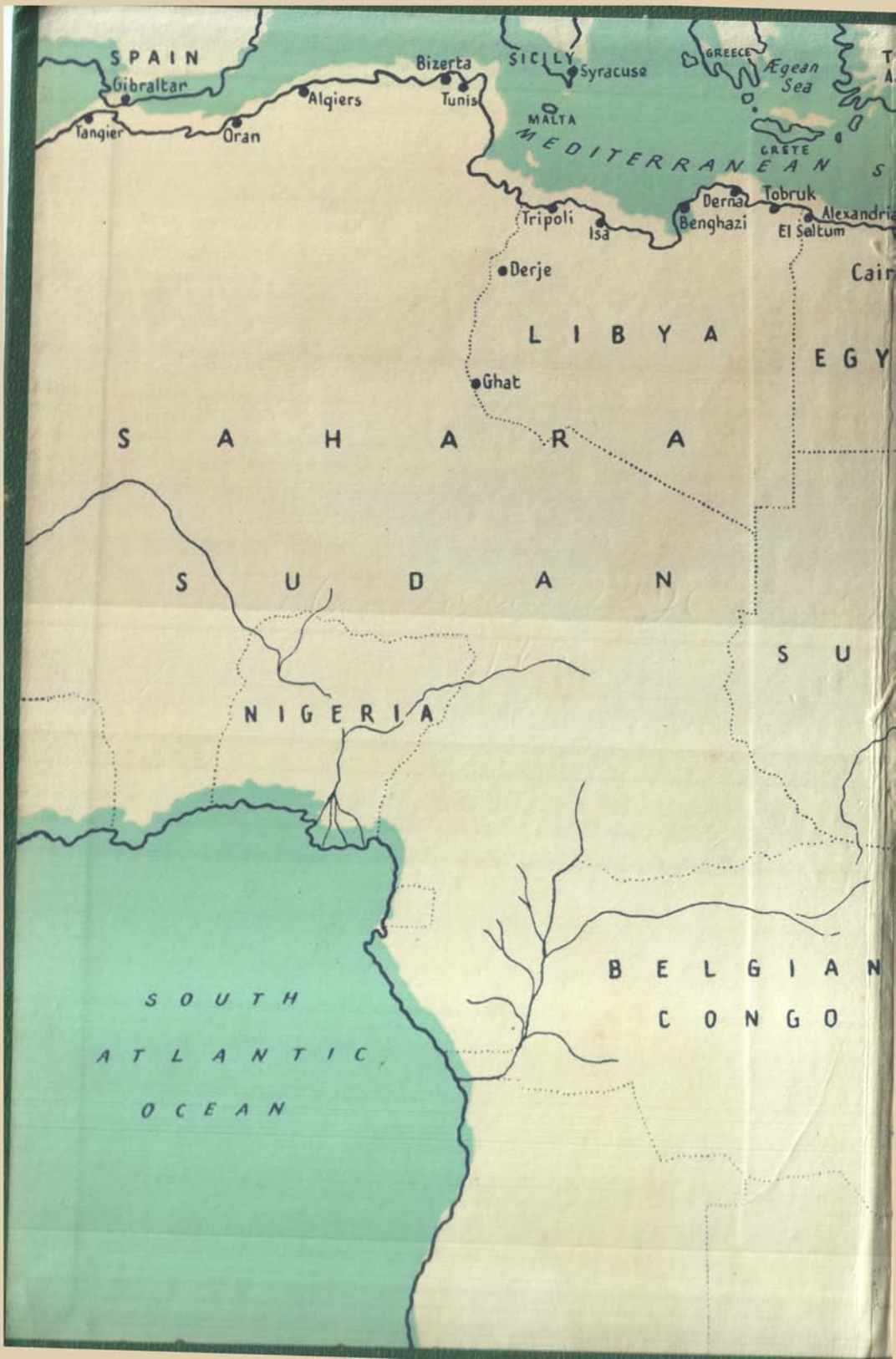
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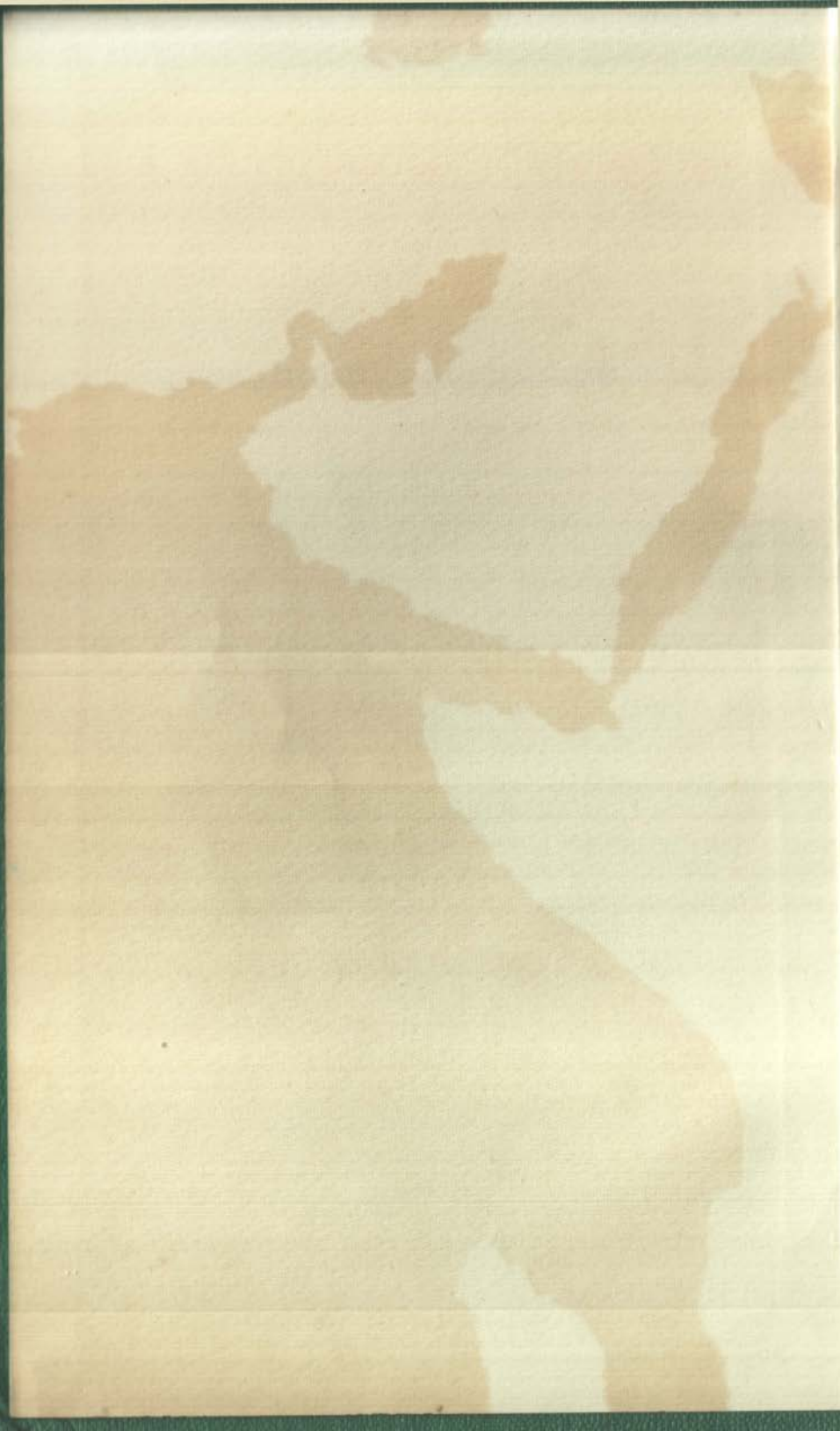

MATILDA WALTZES WITH THE TOMMIES

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BY

MARY KENT HUGHES
(T/Major Thornton, R.A.M.C.)

GEOFFREY CUMBERLEGE
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS,
LEIGHTON HOUSE, MELBOURNE.

Registered at the General Post Office, Melbourne, for transmission through the post as a book.

FIRST EDITION - - - - - 1943.
SECOND IMPRESSION - - 1944.
THIRD IMPRESSION - - 1946.

Wholly set up and printed in Australia by Ramsay, Ware Publishing Pty. Ltd., 129 King Street, Melbourne, C.1, 1944.

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Dedicated to the Memory of my Husband, Wilfrid Kent Hughes, M.B. (Lond.), M.R.C.S., F.R.A.C.S.

FOREWORD

BY

PROFESSOR W. A. OSBORNE, M.B., D.Sc., F.A.C.S.

THERE is in most of us a perverse tendency to find fault rather than to appreciate and praise when we pay a visit to another country. What we do not like and what is missing loom up with dilated contours, whilst what is better than our homeland provides we take for granted and accept without thanks. One reason why Byron is so beloved in the European Continent is that he left grumbling about smells and the absence of British beer and beef to his valet, and fastened on the interesting, the informative and the beautiful. Mrs. Kent Hughes follows the rare Byron tradition, and this fact is, in a large measure, responsible for the charm of her narrative. It gives me particular pleasure to note in her writing today the same qualities which marked her out as a student; the same strong personality, the same pervading sense of humour, the same breezy candour, the same meticulous accuracy of description. I believe Mrs. Kent Hughes could have written an attractive record of travel even in the hum-drum days of peace, but as a spectator of, and as far as she was able, a participant in the mighty events of global war, she now offers something likely to have permanent historical interest.

"The Hall,"
Kangaroo Ground,
Victoria, Australia.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My thanks are due to Lt.-Col. M. L. Powell, A.A.M.C., for permission to use some of his photographs. Also to "Old Digger," Frank Crozier, for his original sketches for the cover designs.

M.K.H.

CHAPTER I.

THE "Oronsay" scooted up the channel with a submarine on her tail.

How often through the years had I dreamed of the first sight of England from a steamer's deck! Green fields topping the red earth of Devon, or the chalk cliffs of Dover! It was, of course, to be a fine day upon which we would approach England, possibly a day in early spring.

But things were not working out quite that way. For one thing, my girlish dreams had not included the submarine. Nor had I visualized myself as one about to apply for a commission in the British Army. The scenery, too, was quite different from specification. It was not early spring: it was the end of winter, an entirely different matter in England. And I had not pictured the English Channel strewn with wrecks under a leaden sky which was merged with the sea—sloping masts projecting helplessly, short and tall, at varying angles. I thought of an enormous grey pincushion with black pins stuck in at random.

The submarine decided to call it a day: it dropped astern and the engines slowed down to a reasonable pace. Bells rang and we were released from boat stations. Huddled in a big overcoat over a costume designed for an Australian, not an English, winter, the potential British Army officer shivered in the bows. At this stage of the war, France was still clinging desperately to the Maginot line. At Aden, while we sweltered sleepless behind blacked-out ports, an Italian luxury liner had insouciantly blazed with light from stem to stern—for she was neutral! The "Oronsay" changed course: it should have been strange to find her heading east when for six weeks—13,000 miles—she had been headed west to north. But in that cold greyness there was not the slightest dull shine of the sun to mark our change of course. This was not at all what I had expected. I sighed and went below to breakfast.

Forty passengers on a liner accustomed to carrying eight hundred—but instead we had shipped a huge

cargo of wool and wheat and meat, much more useful in Britain! And I had felt I was bringing part of my country along, when earlier in the voyage the deck space had been cumbered by transport wagons and ambulances made in Australia, each with a kangaroo and a boomerang emblazoned on the mudguard. I took my seat beside an elderly clergyman, returning home after fifty years well spent in the cure of Australian souls. He was a great joy to me. On the previous evening, he had been heard to address a smart young thing who was practising the piano in the lounge.

"Your music, I take it, is of a purely experimental nature. Would you mind desisting while I write!"

Dear, brave old Mr. Mallett. He was conducting a service on the boat deck one Sunday, when a bomber flew over the ship, and the voice did not falter although the old eyes could not possibly have seen that the 'plane was "one of ours." My first experience of the Englishman's courage: later on I came to take it for granted.

Fun we had had in plenty, especially with the children on board. Told by his mother to keep her a seat at the cinema, one small boy planked himself in the front row. A returning Colonial Governor-General stepped up to the chair beside the urchin.

"But you can't sit there—that's my mother's seat."

"Indeed?" smiled His Excellency. "Then I shall sit in the next chair!"

On this morning of our arrival in England, the breakfast table was soon in a flap when an Irish priest with sparkling blue eyes announced that if we went up quickly we might see the "Normandie," whose whereabouts had been a matter of conjecture for some weeks. All the young and moderately young, including myself, tore up the stairs, to slink back sheepishly when somebody remembered that it was 1st April, 1940!

The big ship picked her way cautiously. On her starboard side the masts of a sunken merchantman, and to port a ripple of grey water to mark the treacherous Goodwin sands. She rounded the South Foreland and entered the Thames estuary, leaving the wrecks behind, and suddenly buildings appeared

out of the mist. Grim looking houses of Gravesend, that were later to suffer so badly in the blitz. River shipping, barges, tugs. This really was the Thames!

We tied up at Tilbury. I am not sure which would take the prize for being the most depressing entrance to any country—Tilbury or Fremantle. But after all, it was Tilbury, and oh! I was so glad to see it! Just as two and a half years later I was prepared to overlook the scenic deficiencies of Fremantle!

Going up in the train, I was struck by the paper crosses on all the windows, for in Port Said, driving round the native quarter as all tourists do, we had learnt that windows presenting these signs were those of houses that no nice person would like to enter. Innocently I remarked to the Scottish lassie, my chief companion on the voyage, that even with the best intentions, surely all the sailors in the world could not sustain business on such a wholesale scale.

"Haud your wheesht," replied she. "That's for protection against air raids."

The hotel recommended to me was quiet, dingy, and frequented by old ladies. There was a waiter called Charles, a retainer of twenty-five years' standing, with a long coat and walrus whiskers. Beneath my bed was an article which I had thought extinct. I rang the War Office, made an appointment for the next day, and set forth to see London.

Interminable vastness of grey stone, a feeling of suffocation in the narrow streets. Even the squares appeared utterly desolate with their dead-looking bare trees. Some months later I learned to admire London and appreciate the architectural beauties of individual buildings, in the company of one who knew and loved it well. But never shall I forget the biting misery of that first day. No kith or kin there, for all my great-grandparents had emigrated to Australia nearly a century earlier. There was a drizzling rain, and the cold got into my marrow bones. Nothing for it but to buy three hot water bags and creep back to the hotel before black-out.

Next day things seemed brighter. A cheerful red bus took me down to the Embankment: all I could remember here from my reading was that people com-

mitted suicide off it. Looking at the uniform grey of clouds, water and pavements, I could not find it in my heart to blame them, so hurried on to the War Office in case I should be tempted! Formalities there were surprisingly few: I interviewed several kindly old gentlemen glittering with brass and ribbons. Outside the office of the Big Man, the major escorting me whispered—

"He's a bit of a fire-eater, but he'll be all right with you!" He certainly was — both! He had the fiercest moustache under the keenest of eyes, but he smiled, shook hands, and welcomed me pleasantly to the Corps.

Then came an examination by a Medical Board of eight extremely solemn and senior officers. They were all gentlemen of obvious rectitude: still, the Regulations insisted that one must have a chaperon, so the highways and byways of that building were searched until there came to light a stout, serious charwoman in a starched apron, who played sentinel while the heart-beats were being counted. The apprehensive glint in her china-blue eyes seemed to suggest that the party might be expected to become rough at any minute.

What queer psychological twist is it that makes one always want to laugh in surroundings of the utmost dignity? That long, high room, and the eight gloomy intellectuals seated round the heavy table, were all in keeping; but the charwoman, and my flippant Australian self clothed in a grey flannel shroud left over from the Crimea, provided almost Gilbertian relief.

My gravity had nearly given out by the time the eye examination was reached. Not being able to read the gibberish in small print, I muttered:

" 'Hell, said the Duchess.' "

"What was that?" asked the very reserved gentleman beside me, who did not know his A. P. Herbert.

"Well, never mind if you cannot manage that line. Very few people can. I am at liberty to inform you that you have passed the examination of this Board."

So I became a lieutenant in His Majesty's Forces.

CHAPTER II

A WEEK later, trussed up in a uniform that made me feel like a small bottle of beer in a large crate of straw, I reported for duty at the appointed hospital in Southern England, rather nervously. A faux pas just outside the entrance was not helpful to one's confidence. A group of Tommies was being drilled on the road: as I passed they all clicked their heels and stood at attention, and their sergeant actually stopped in the middle of a bellow and saluted me! I nearly fell in my tracks with fright, for I just did not know the answer. All I could do was to manage a feeble smile and "Good-morning," with the uncomfortable realisation that I was not living up to the occasion. The A.T.S. officers were soon to change all that! They were extraordinarily good soldiers. They took to regimentation as a boy to mischief.

My Commanding Officer, unfortunately, did not run true to the form set by the War Office. In his eye was the look of one who is thinking: "That bloody woman!" — a look with which I was to become only too familiar during the ensuing two and a half years.

"I don't know how you will get on, I'm sure," he groaned. "Women in the Corps — the men won't like it. But you must do the best you can. You will live in the A.T.S. Officers' Mess. Good-morning."

Perhaps the patients were not too pleased at being attended by a woman doctor, but they could take it. The Tommy can take anything that calls for dogged endurance and good humour. So long as I kept my maternal instincts in check, all was well with the Tommies. But on one occasion, when I caught sight of one of my staff weighed down by "full web equipment," I involuntarily exclaimed—

"Oh, you poor boy, do you really have to carry all that?"

His friends never let him hear the end of it. His face, when he knew me well enough to tell me how I had humiliated him, reminded me of that of my five-

year-old son, years before at a school speech night, who had cut me dead when I smiled at him.

"You see, Mum," he had explained later, "I was afraid, if I gave you any encouragement at all, that you might call me 'darling' in front of the boys!"

Work at the hospital was intensely interesting, and one felt it a privilege to be associated with men whose names were, not household words, say, clinical words, throughout the medical world. Once I kindly tried to show a new arrival how to do something in the way of investigating a patient's heart. He took it so kindly. Later I found to my dismay that he was one of Harley Street's leading heart specialists! Now I laugh at myself every time my eye lights on the binding of his famous text-book.

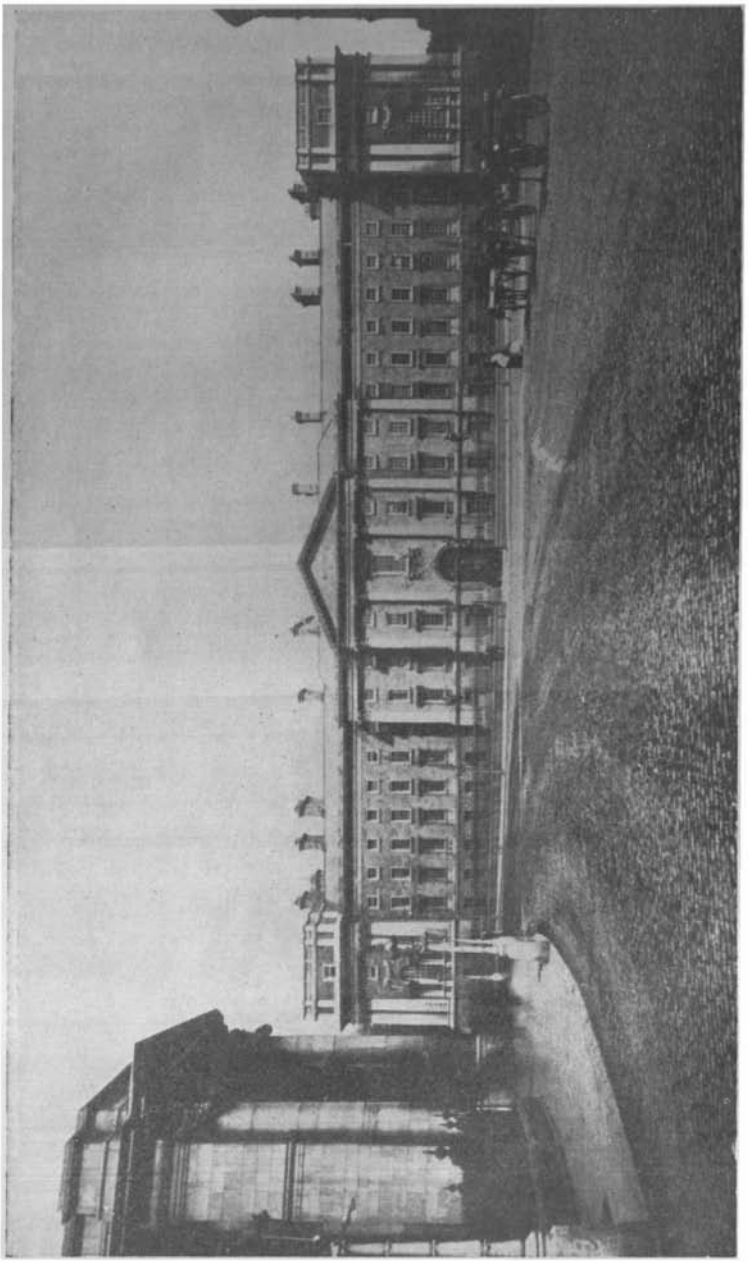
At this stage of the war, surprising things were happening in Norway—Oslo bombed by the Germans, our troops retreating from Southern Norway, Namsos blitzed out of existence. Talk in the women's mess became bewildered — of course there could be no possibility of our being beaten: we were, perhaps, a bit short of equipment, but that would soon be rectified.

I took to hiking in my spare time, through the lovely lanes of Surrey. Like most untravelled Australians, I was amazed at the extent of the open country. Used to our own land's vastness, where in some parts there are hundreds of miles between houses, it had seemed that the various towns of England ought almost to impinge on one another in order to accommodate the huge population. The extent and beauty of England's breathing-spaces were a source of perpetual joy.

Up and up the steps of Farnham's old castle keep — my first experience of the actual feeling of history. Hitherto the Civil War had existed for me only in books, now I could almost hear the heart-beats of Royalists and Roundheads pursuing one another around these stairs. After lingering by the birthplace and the grave of William Cobbett, I re-read "Rural Rides" with an appreciation quite undreamt of when I had read extracts at school.

The villages over the Hog's Back were delightful.

A GLADE IN THE NEW FOREST.



THE ENTRANCE TO TRINITY COLLEGE, DUBLIN.

Little old Compton still kept open its potteries and picture gallery — the only gallery I was able to see in England. A London policeman, asked if he could direct me to a picture gallery that was open, replied: "All the picture places are around Piccadilly Circus. You will be in time for the afternoon session!" In the beautiful setting of his home, on the side of a hill among oaks and sycamores, no wonder that beauty had been reproduced in the pictures of G. F. Watts!

Next came a temporary tour of duty down near the New Forest. Spring had broken out at last, and the way everything in sight started blooming simultaneously was positively dramatic. In the Australian bush all the trees are evergreens, and dead leaves are replaced so gradually that little change is noticed beyond reddening of the new gum-tips: wild heath and orchids bloom in midwinter, and the gullies are ablaze with golden wattle long before the arrival of official spring.

But in England it was winter one day and spring the next, with birch trees showing opening buds as well as their fairy-like white trunks. Primroses and bluebells appeared along the railway line with much more vivid colouring than their cousins cultivated so tenderly in our bush garden at home. Nobody had told me that rhododendrons grew wild in England. Another lovely surprise! So also was the vividness of the colouring in the New Forest. Every shade of green seemed to be there. In the glade where William Rufus is said to have been killed, and at peaceful Beaulieu Abbey, I again experienced that strange new sensation of living in the past, as at Farnham Castle and in the ancient churches. Afterwards, in Eire and Palestine and Iraq, I became so accustomed to this feeling that often I had to remind myself that it was the present that was the reality, not the past!

Winchester came well up to expectations. A Wykhamist of my acquaintaince in New Zealand, who had gone out sixty years before, had described the School and Cathedral so vividly and faithfully that I was disappointed in nothing.

Recalled to my original hospital, I found Dunkirk survivors coming in, bootless, with clothing torn and stained by blood and water. And yet all anxious to

be patched up again quickly so as to "have another shot at them." Several Frenchmen were among them: I heard a Voluntary Aid lamenting the difficulties of giving an enema in schoolgirl French!

One night a French professor dined in the mess. Asked what France would do if Italy came in against her, he shrugged and replied—

"We had the Italians with us last time. Let somebody else have them this time!"

On to a party in a V.A.'s flat. Great girls, terrific workers, and always so kind and decent to me, possibly because I had belonged to the first Australian Voluntary Aid Detachment in the last war. Debutantes who had never so much as washed a cup and saucer performed the foulest of hospital tasks with smiles and jokes. These girls were billeted in what had been in peace time the quarters of the Army's "married families"—delightful term! Flats that were comfortable and homely, although painted the dingy manure brown beloved of the Army. Two rooms, plus bathroom and kitchenette, the custom being to make one a bed-sitter and the other a bedroom.

On this particular night, being "on call" for the operating theatre staff, our hostess was supposed to walk up through the rain to the hospital to see if she was wanted. However, thinking the rain might prove sufficient excuse for not going out, she ventured to report to the Matron by telephone.

"Oh no, Nurse, you must come up," replied that lady firmly. "You know Colonel Blank may be wanting you."

As the girl lacked the courage to explain that the said colonel was at the moment sitting on her bed sipping pink gin, she had to put on raincoat and storm cap and walk a quarter of a mile through the blackout and rain to find out that he did not require her services!

At that time, I was billeted with two A.T.S. officers in one of a terrace of houses. There was a bath tub in the kitchen, but the cistern rose only to one hot bath per diem, an average of two baths a week each, which seemed slumming it to me after handling Tommies all day. Little did I dream that the day

would come when I would cheerfully pay 2/6 for a monthly bath in Basrah!

From my bedroom window, I had an unbroken view of our coal-yard and that of the "lines" opposite. One evening, thinking dejectedly that no more depressing sight existed than heaps of wet coal, I pulled down the blind, put on the light at 4 p.m., and feasted my eyes on the scarlet, gold, and improbable blue poppies of the bedspread I had bought to hide my dark army blankets. Oh for the sight of a warm brown paddock and a dried-up billabong! I thought of Dorothea McKellar's poem—

The love of field and coppice,
  Of green and shaded lanes,
Of ordered woods and gardens
  Is running in your veins.
Strong love of grey-blue distance,
  Brown streams and soft dim skies—
I know, but cannot share it—
  My love is otherwise.

I love a sunburnt country,
  A land of sweeping plains,
Of rugged mountain ranges,
  Of droughts and flooding rains.
I love her far horizons,
  I love her jewel sea,
Her beauty and her terror—
  The wide brown land for me!

The stark white ring-barked forests,
  All tragic to the moon,
The sapphire-misted mountains,
  The hot gold hush of noon.
Green tangle of the brushes
  Where lithe lianas coil,
And orchids deck the treetops
  And ferns the warm dark soil.

An opal-hearted country,
A wilful, lavish land—
All you who have not loved her,
You will not understand.
Though Earth holds many splendours,
Wherever I may die,
I know to what brown country
My homing thoughts will fly.

Having little to do at the moment, I was trying to alleviate the nostalgia for home by sketching a kangaroo on the front of my tin helmet. In came the A.T.S. batwoman with a home letter.

"I hope," wrote Wilga, "that the good old Aussie tail is up and wagging!"

"Whacko!" said I, "And it's staying up, too."

So I added a defiant flourish to the tail of my 'roo and the caption "Sursum caudam"—keep your tail up! My motto for the duration.

Jeff and Mutt, the hospital padres, were mildly amused at the specimen of heraldry up to date on my tin hat. Not so the Commanding Officer.

"Take that off at once," he snapped. "If you must chalk anything on your steel helmet, you may put the Corps colours on the side."

He seemed rather grudging even about this. I saluted and slunk off, rejoicing inside that I was only his slave and not his wife!

That night, my little radio picked up a gorgeous rendering of "The Twilight of the Gods" from the Paris station. Imagine my horror when this was followed by the playing of the "Horst Wessel" song. I knew the air quite well, because I had been curious enough to ask a German refugee in New Zealand to play it for me, which she did much against her inclinations.

I tore downstairs to the room where some A.T.S. officers were grouped round the fire, and gasped that "The Germans are in Paris—the radio is playing the Nazi song."

"Nonsense," they said. "They could not possibly be. You must not spread these alarmist rumours."

But next morning, the news came through that the Germans had entered Paris.

There were lots of Canadians round the hospital at that time—large and cheerful, like big St. Bernard dogs. Their conversation caused me much mirth.

"Look out, bo," said the driver of the car in which I was getting a lift. "Or you'll get a pants-full of mudguard."

The Tommy addressed side-stepped promptly, calling out something about the wrong side of the road.

Some of the Canadian officers had brought their wives over, and the authorities, in a thoroughly courteous fashion of course, suggested that it would be nice if these ladies returned to their homeland, and offered them every facility for so doing.

"Are you going?" I asked of one charming woman.

"Oh, no!" she drawled. "These English girls are just too fascinating. We are staying right here by our husbands."

A large Canadian surgeon working at our hospital was "Tim" to many of his compatriots in the ranks, who came to him for treatment. This caused much astonishment. I never saw, or heard of, an English officer being actually unkind to a man in the ranks. On the other hand, with such an entirely different social system, there could not possibly be in the British Army the cameraderie between officers and men which is such a feature of our "colonial" armies.

A great pal of mine was one Gladys, a Canadian girl who had come over to join the A.T.S. as a transport driver. However, when it was discovered that she could write a high shorthand speed, she was promptly relegated to an office.

"What do you think of this?" she burst in on me one night. "I've had to write a letter, in quintuplicate mind you, about a tree so many feet from somewhere and so many yards from somewhere else, which is bending at a dangerous angle and may become a menace to public safety. Did you and I come over the stormy seas to a war, or didn't we?"

Gladys got all the action she wanted later on, when she succeeded finally in obtaining an ambulance to drive through the blitzes.

CHAPTER III

THE fall of France left everybody stunned and the question of the day was "What would happen to the French Navy?" I had lately read Herman Rauschning's book, "Hitler Speaks," and fragments recurred to me.

"The confusion will be beyond belief. I shall long have had relations with the men who will form a new Government, a Government to suit me. We shall find such men in every country. We shall not need to bribe them. They will come of their own accord. Ambition and self-seeking arrogance will bring them . . . . "

Who, I wondered, had the fiend got at? And—terrible thought—could there possibly be any "such men" within the Commonwealth of Nations?

Feeling much in need of good cheer, I set off for a cup of tea with the sister of the Mental Ward, the one person of my acquaintance who could invariably be counted on to know something amusing. I found her talking to one of her "pets" who had just returned from a visit to the psychiatrist.

"Coo, 'e didn't 'arf give me a bad time, Sister," he was saying. "Arst me did a rabbit have fevvers or fur! Do you think 'e's quite right in 'is 'ead?"

The psychiatrist later drifted in for a cup of tea.

"There's no doubt about that fellow Johnson of yours, Sister," he remarked. "He's quite nuts."

"Well," smiled Sister, "He seems to have his doubts about you!"

A bomb dropped near our hospital, killing five. Notices appeared around the villages asking men to help put up road barriers, and anyone having spare tools to donate them. Instructions were issued warning civilians, in the event of an invasion, to tell the Germans nothing and to give them no food . . . . Haystacks were built in the centre of fields, so as to make difficult the landing of 'planes.

For months preparations had been going on at the hospital: everyone knew just what to do when the blitz started. Our first "warning" came just after mid-

night towards the end of July. Being in charge of a first aid post, I got up and dressed easily enough, but once in the dark hall, for what seemed ages I could not find the door. Finally I got out, and walked down the moonlit road—searchlights meeting overhead, sentries everywhere, who stopped me with a bayonet against my chest no less than four times on my way to the post, where I found six V.A.'s and five stretcher bearers with their corporal.

We sterilized the instruments, put out the dressings, and soon had everything ready for any casualties that might arrive, and the corporal made tea on the primus. Then to bed. Rolled in blankets, we camped on the ambulance stretchers (which seemed as narrow as rolling pins) as per instructions on the wall, which ended deliciously—

"A hot water bag placed at the feet will quickly induce sleep." Just imagine! A hot water bag as an antidote to the clamour of planes, guns and bombs! Nobody slept much that first night, though later we learnt to do so in spite of the snores of our Tommy stretcher-bearers rising high above the other forms of uproar outside that thin tile roof.

The "All Clear" went within two hours, and the girls and men returned to barracks. However, the corporal and I had to wait for the "white" that indicated the final departure of the Jerries, and the corporal regaled me with yarns of the last war in France. He was from Yorkshire, and my fuddled brain was hard put to it to follow his remarks. For the first time it struck me that, ugly and all as our Australian accent may be, nobody seems to have any difficulty in understanding what we say!

Back to the Nurses' Home, to find that everybody had returned to bed and forgotten to leave the door open for me. I could not bear to wake them—probably no one on earth could have done so anyhow, so I dragged off my tunic and skirt, scrambled on to a shed roof, and with the help of a drainpipe, in through the bathroom window. I chuckled sleepily as I wondered how many young bloods had entered this historic house by similiar means during the last century of

England's military history: I'll be bound I was the first woman officer to "pioneer the route."

Came a telegram from my husband, who had arrived to see if he could do anything for England. He had been in the R.A.M.C. in the last war, and had been Surgeon-in-Chief to the Anglo-Russian hospitals. I met him at Paddington and his first remark was—

"Here's your so-and-so typewriter. Don't they have them in the British Army!"

Looking after my little portable on the first thirteen thousand miles of its travels had proved a great responsibility.

There followed a joyous week's "compassionate leave" in London together: he knew and loved the old city well. How different were the impressions formed as one came to know it even a tiny bit better! I think London is typical of the race that built and keeps on building it—cold and distant on early acquaintance, but genuinely kind and friendly once one gets to know and understand it. The drawback to that characteristic, of course, lies in the fact that in wartime the authorities invariably think it is time for one to move off somewhere else, just as one has "broken in" a new set of acquaintances.

Bus rides became a delight as different buildings were identified and their history recollected. We went to my husband's beloved Bart's and saw the fountain around which he had once sprinted in three seconds. Lunched at Simpson's with its huge joints and picturesque waiters, and never a sign of the Army. An interesting revelation of another world in London, not in khaki. The multiplicity of London's worlds!

And the joy of being able to listen again to talk of history and literature, instead of war and hospital shop, which filled the lives of everyone I had met during the last six months. Not that anyone ever mentioned the unpleasant phases of the war, they were ignored in conversation.

Harley Street, whose doors I had thought forbidding, now opened on to wármth and welcome inside.

But war in all its ferocity was coming to London. One day, when we were going up to town from the South, the train stopped on a viaduct outside Maldon

railway station. We looked out and saw our first glimpse of hell . . . . Fires blazing, houses toppling, planes wheeling overhead. A constant pain in the eardrums tortured by a confused noise as of the roaring of all the demons of hell.

I made that same journey the next day. Heaps of rubble sprawled where homes had been. And from each pile there flew a child's Union Jack!

No, I thought, people like these can never be defeated. If their bodies are exterminated one by one, their spirits will remain indestructible.

The R.A.M.C. were not taking surgeons over age unless they had been regular soldiers. The Emergency Medical Service had all the volunteers it needed. So, regretfully, my husband returned to Australia on the same ship that had brought him over as ship's surgeon, leaving me to carry on the job for which he was considered too old.

Back I went, to work in the hospital in the daytime and at the first aid post at night. There was one heavenly night during the ensuing month, when Jerry forgot about the Luftwaffe or was busy elsewhere. We actually slept through the night in bed, and knew the luxury of sheets!

The following night was particularly hectic, culminating in our being turned out of the post because a time bomb had parked outside. Next morning I met one of my six V.A.'s, looking as unruffled and exotic as ever as she carried a basin of water, nearly as big as herself, down the corridor.

"Oh please," she called. "If you are going down to the town, will you make an appointment for me to get my eyebrows plucked at 4 o'clock?"

Dictators come and go, I mused, but there is something eternal about the way the English refuse to have their routine disturbed. I came to understand the "You can't do that, it has never been done before" attitude that used to enrage me so at first. Of course, custom and the "done thing" are simply fundamental to the British character.

Time took its blitz-infested course. The superheroines of England were, I think, those women who went on having babies just as though peace reigned in

the skies. In the Families' Hospital, at the sound of the siren the patients were carried downstairs in chairs by orderlies; there were no lifts in that old building. They slept on stretchers on ground floor corridors. The orderlies snored beside them. The Night Sister liked the Tommies about—"They give the women confidence, so many men stamping around —also they don't like to ask for the bedpan every half hour!"

All the nurses had "refugee" cases packed and kept handy in the cellar ready for emergency. The Home Sister invited me to go with her to inspect the contents. Some contained bits and pieces of snappy trousseau undies: others a spare uniform and rug. But the lid of one case opened brazenly on two bottles of beer and a hundred cigarettes!

Questioned later, the bright and pretty owner of that case maintained that in an emergency somebody would always give one the necessities of life: but where, she asked, would one be sure of picking up the luxuries? I may add that the next time I encountered that lass, in the Shatt al Arab Hotel at Basrah, she was surrounded by luxury in the form of five naval officers!

We had two German pilots in at that time. One was a tragic kid of seventeen. He cried for his mother. The other was a surly, beetle-browed tough who answered just "yes" or "no" when spoken to. However, when he heard me speak he told me that his mother had been Australian. I sincerely hoped he took after Vater, for a nastier bit of work I had never encountered. He was very anxious to know how far he was from the German Army, and nothing I could say would convince him that by the grace of God they were still on their own side of the Channel.

X-ray work all day and want of sleep at night made me so ill-tempered that the C.O. got sick of my tongue and handed me out two weeks' sick leave. For the first time I had to admit that my physical strength was not quite that of my "brother officers," and did it hurt! Anyhow, the only place for sleep at that time was Eire, so off I set with the C.O.'s blessing.

CHAPTER IV

THE first night in Ireland boded well for a happy holiday. Warmth and friendliness everywhere. By a peat fire, I sat and listened while a woman at the hotel talked of Warrandyte, my own township at home. Her sister had spent many holidays there, and had written to her of the upper reaches of the river Yarra Yarra cascading over its rocks between banks aflame with golden wattle.

Larne was rather reminiscent of New Zealand's Dunedin, also a harbour in a lough winding in among round-topped hills sparsely wooded. But the soft light and colouring of Antrim were unlike anything I had ever seen.

It was intriguing the way the sea came almost up to the railway line. On the platform was a gentleman wearing the stiff collar affected by my smart city uncles before the last war. And a black iron hen perched complacently on the green pillar-box; she laid an egg and played a tune on the insertion of a penny. I rejoiced that my uniform had been left at the hotel: it would have looked most theatrical in these surroundings where war was not.

Belfast was "a foine city" indeed, with its impressive buildings and Civic Square. From the train to Dublin I could see white farmhouses with gaily painted window-sills and thatched roofs. The pocket-handkerchief fields, green beyond my brightest hopes, were demarcated by hedges, in the formation of which a large part was played by fuchsia bushes. Low, bare rounded hills. Cows there were in plenty, and sheep with black faces and feet, goats galore, and an occasional donkey. The dark Mountains of Mourne literally did "run down to the sea"—right to the water's edge!

Dublin we reached at ten p.m. in the rain, and in October, 1940, it seemed eerie to see a city of brilliantly lighted streets and shops. And everybody seemed happy—I had not heard such chatter and laughter since leaving Melbourne. I forgot the war and entered

completely into Fairyland. And the first thing I did in my hotel bedroom was to pull up the blind with the light full on, which gave me greater joy than anything I had done since leaving home.

The hotel was just opposite Trinity College, so I started my sight-seeing there. When I told the dear old man in charge of the Library that my grandfather and two great-grandfathers had been graduates, I thought he would have given me the whole College!

To my Australian eyes, one of the most arresting sights was that of the river running right through the centre of the city, under its many noble bridges, so high and so wide. The banks were built up with stone parapets, and on either side of the river ran a wide thoroughfare.

For grandeur and simplicity I have not seen the equal of the Bank of Ireland with its central facade and projecting wings that form an Ionic colonnade. Before the Union in 1802, this building was Ireland's Parliament House: well could I imagine the ghosts of the Knight of Gwynne and Bagenal Daly and other members who opposed the Union, standing and shaking their heads under that portico, over all the trouble their descendants found in undoing the effects of the vote Lord Castlereagh had so ably secured . . . .

I walked away from the Bank and was pleased to meet, out in the centre of O'Connell Street, a kinsman of my grandfather's, at least, his statue! I was just focussing the camera when a large policeman strolled over.

"And what would ye be doin' now?" he asked. "I can't let you be taking a photy here, you may be wanting to show it to the innimy."

"They are all beautiful buildings," said I. "But it's only the statue I want. You see, Smith O'Brien was a sort of ancestor of mine."

"Is that the case, then?" And the policeman shook me violently by the hand. "The great pathriot himsilf, no less? Here Danny"—to a youth sitting on the kerb—"Bring your taxi round so the lady can shtand on the shtep and get a good photy!"

On by tram to the Hill of Howth (they call it Hoath) a peninsula jutting out into the Irish Sea and forming one of the headlands of Dublin Bay. I climbed up and up through heather and gorse, to see the "Eye of Ireland," a sea-worn isle sparkling with sun on its splashing foam. I looked across from Dunleary Bay below to the Wicklow Hills, which showed rugged, spiky and misty-blue, and I thought of my grandmother's tale of holy St. Kevin. He was pursued through these mountains by Kathleen, a beautiful and high-born maiden, from whose unwelcome attentions he finally ridded himself by pushing her over a cliff into the dark waters of a lake!

The square towers and battlements of Howth Castle rose above its surrounding trees. And at a little tea-shop on the summit, I heard the legend of the Castle. It seems that once there was a Pirate Chieftainess, Grace O'Malley, who often left her home on the west coast and sailed east on business. She had once paid a social call on Queen Elizabeth in London. Arrived one day at Howth, she was enraged to find the gates of the castle locked, host and guests being at dinner. So in revenge she kidnapped the heir, who was playing in the grounds. (Presumably she got a lackey to climb the high gates.) She took the child home with her, releasing him at last only on the promise that the gates and main door should never be closed during dinner.

The walls of that little café were covered thick with pictures of the patriots, and I read a poem of P. H. Pearse about what I had just seen—

On the strand of Howth
Breaks a sounding wave,
A lone seagull screams
Above the bay.
On the harbour of Dunleary
Are boat and ship,
With sails set,
Ploughing the waves.

On the strand of Howth,
Where a wave breaks,
And the harbour of Dunleary
Where a ship rocks
On the sun that shines
On the side of Slieverua,
And the wind that blows
Down over its brow.

The next day I took the train to Killarney, in Gaelic "Kill-airne" or the Church of the Sloe-trees. I found a great fascination in the place names, even in translation. There was The Church of the Oakwoods, the Church of the Hollytrees. The River of the Shadows. The Place of the Little Dancing Bushes.

On past Clondalkin, where I saw one of the Round Towers "raised for Time to count his ages by." Past the Curragh, that famous racecourse, and the Blue Wicklow hills beyond. The guard had a good old face and naughty old eyes, and he sat down beside me and pointed out all the sights.

"Yes, it is a beautiful counthry indeed. The more I see of it the better I like it, and I am backwards and forwards all day. We have the best men, the best women, the best counthry, the best cattle and the best horses—and they don't know it!"

And from the lid of his billycan he gave me some strong tea.

The train jogged quietly on through the greenness of Eire. The River Barrow crossed by a bridge, which contained a canal! The Bog of Allen, which the guard said grows again as quickly as they cut out the peat, the mountains of Tipperary with a cup-shaped depression between their two peaks. The guard told me in all seriousness that the missing piece had been bitten out by the Devil to form the Rock of Cashel.

Into the carriage came an Irish lady. Never have I seen needlework to equal that of the darns in her stockings and gloves. She had a lovely voice and talked to me as to a friend. Her only son died for England in the First World War: both his sons were now in the R.A.F. A young couple, en route to Tralee for their honeymoon, entered the carriage.

At Killarney, as at Dublin, it was a real thrill to step out of the train on to a lighted platform, instead of groping around in the light—so called—of tiny blue globes.

An enormous hotel porter, like a musical comedy potentate in his gaily-coloured uniform, came up and took my suitcase, and, smiling all over himself, said in a soft insinuating voice—

"Would it be a hotel you are looking for now? Come along with me and I'll look after you, girl, 6/6 bed and breakfast."

How the blarney of that "girl" touch went to my middle-aged heart! He took my arm in his free hand and led me to a modern hotel. I blinked incredulously at the h. and c. in the bedroom which was puzzling until it dawned on me that in normal times Killarney catered for so many American tourists.

The maid—black-haired, violet eyed above rose-tinted cheeks—brought me an "early morning" cup of tea at 9 a.m. and announced that breakfast would be ready any time after ten! (And meself used to reveillé at six!)

I was still dawdling happily over breakfast about eleven, when there arrived some friends to take me to their home in a little village, in the Valley of the Blackwater in the County of Cork. The Valley of the Blackwater, where dwelt Sir Walter Raleigh and his friend Edmund Spenser, who wrote here his "Faerie Queen."

> "Down in a dale, hard by a forest's side,
> Far from resort of people that did pass
> In travail to and fro . . . ."

The river flowed quietly between autumn-tinted birches. A peaceful enough locality now, but battles had been fought in these fields, and horsemen can sometimes be heard galloping at night . . . . (The local brew is a strong variety of potheen!)

My hostess had lived in the States and her cottage was a revelation of modern comfort. She had had much strife with Paddy the plumber when she insisted on having a sink as well as a trough in the kitchen. Paddy said it was "the height of nonsense," and would

not even connect the sink for several months! The children were often called by their full names, plus that of their father, e.g., Hannah Mary Kate Jacky Bawn. Very different from Australia, where everyone's name is, if possible, cut down to one syllable—a playmate of my son's answers to "Gord." The youngsters spoke to one another in Gaelic when they did not want their mothers to understand what they were saying.

I used to wake in the morning to the tune of the milkman shouting "Gwan out of that" to his donkey. One morning I was aroused very early—about 1 a.m. by a hullabaloo which turned out to be a drill lesson outside the pub.

"Form fours!" shouted the O.C.

"How the hell can we form fours, when there are only three of us?" Roars of laughter.

My friends were to drive an old lady to hospital in a neighbouring town, and I was invited to go along for the drive. Down we went to Katie's cottage—it was "white-washed pink" and had a thatched roof. From the road we went straight into the sitting-room, one wall of which formed a huge fireplace. All the women in the village were in there to wish her luck—gentle-faced souls with black shawls over their heads, some of them weeping. One well-wisher had brought along a bottle of holy water which she sprinkled freely over Katie, who got into the car more thrilled by the prospect of a drive than worried about her impending operation! We left her at the Nuns' Hospital where every ward was a bay surrounded by flower-beds, and the Sisters wore the familiar white habit of our Sisters of Charity in Australia.

For miles we drove through avenues of oaks, beeches and silver birches turning gold and red, to Drishane Convent in its mellow autumn setting. Here two of the daughters of my friends were at school. Drishane, a fourteenth century castle fallen into disrepair, was restored by nuns who had been exiled from France some twenty years ago, and all the renovations were in strict harmony with the old keep, which is still standing. It belonged originally to a branch of the McCarthy Mor chieftains, who were kings of

Munster. The crumbling relics of the greatness of this once powerful family are now being restored under the regime of Eire's new Government.

The gardens were magnificent—sloping lawns, lily pools, ancient trees; some of the black yews were over a thousand years old. Of course the Castle is haunted, but by a friendly McCarthy ghost. At least, friendly now since the Castle has reverted to the Irish. The Superior lent my friends a manuscript written by the wife of one of the previous owners who had been "usurpers" for a few centuries and who definitely had the wind up over this ghost.

We read the story by candlelight over a peat fire that night, while rain splashed on the windows. I really got the horrors myself, the atmosphere was so exactly right for a ghost story. One cannot disbelieve ghosts and fairies in Eire, they are in the air!

We passed via Blarney Castle to Cork, or Corrach, which means a swamp. Here the River Lee separates into two channels up which the Danes had sailed their wooden ships.

Many months' usage had accustomed me to uniform, but this could not appear in a neutral country, so I was wearing the only alternative—my golf kit, and had come all over feminine again with the acquisition of a handbag. What a nightmare that wretched thing was —repeatedly being forgotten, so accustomed was I to carrying my purse and beauty-parlour distributed around my person in the eight pockets of my he-man's uniform.

The street was fairly crowded, but five minutes after I had carelessly abandoned that bag in a chemist's shop, it was handed to me by a breathless small boy whose boss had sent him out looking for a "foreign lady." It contained all my official papers and tickets back to barracks, but I had literally to force sixpence on to that child.

Everywhere were kindness and hospitality and a genuine welcome to Eire. All the way from Australia! I took tea with two gentle old ladies — the Misses Rawley — probably descendants of the Rawley or Raleigh settlement.

I stood on the road and gazed at the love-in-the-mist

blue of two mountains near Killarney called "Paps of Ana." And I was told that in Gaelic mythology Ana was the Goddess of Prosperity, the Universal Mother; all the gods of the Druids were her children. The greatest of these was Argetlam, "He of the Silver Sword," who was their chief and their war-god. He was the guardian of an invincible sword: also he had five consorts of fighting tendencies who accompanied him into battle. One of these had the power of disguising herself as a carrion crow, who hovered over the fighters. However, Argetlam met his death at the hands of the Fomors, a race of sea-gods whose outpost on earth was an Island off the coast of Donegal . . . .

Past a wayside grave, a relic of the "trouble," we drove to the Gap of Dunloe, a ravine between the Purple Mountain and McGillicuddy's Reeks—serrated shadowed mountains with clouds clothing their peaks and purple heather their sides. I cannot with honesty say I saw any of the Little People, but I know they were there!

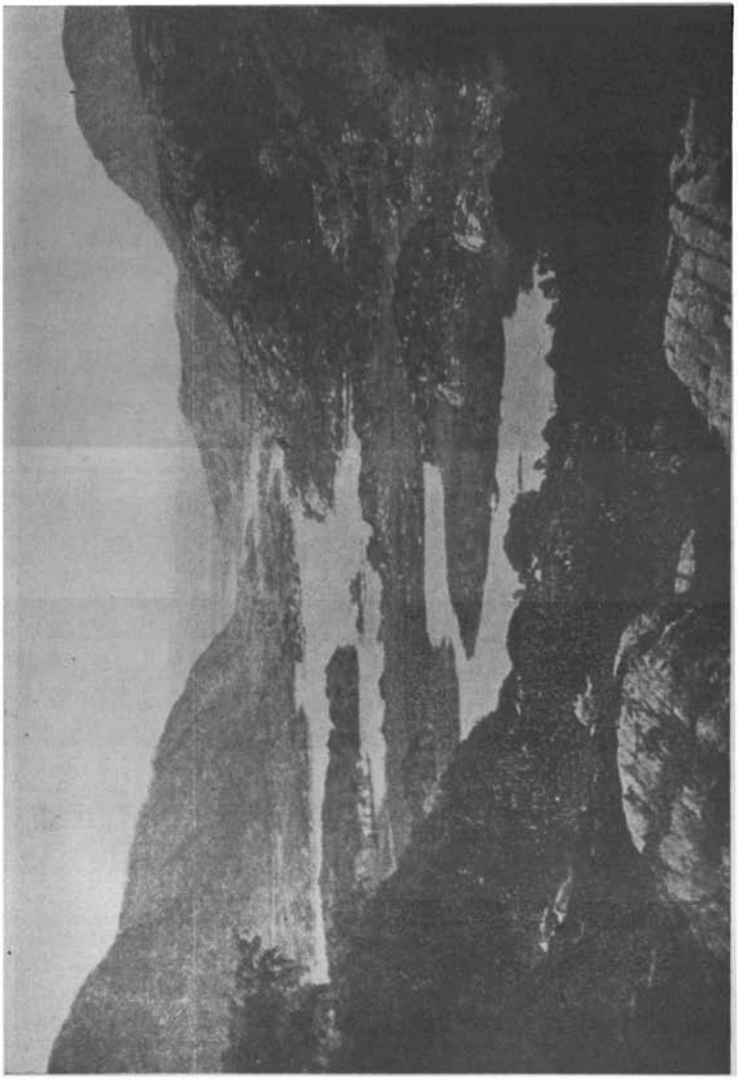
Along came an old man with a brass horn. Every mountain sent back the notes he blew. This is where Tennyson wrote—

"The splendour falls on castle walls
And snowy summits old in story.
The long light shakes,
Across the lakes,
And the wild cataract leaps in glory.
Blow, bugles, blow; set the wild echoes flying.
Blow, bugles, answer echoes, dying, dying, dying."

When I learnt that poem at school, I little thought that one day I should be listening to those very echoes!

Then down to the Lakes. First to Ross Castle whose ivy-draped keep remains after half-a-thousand years, towering above the largest island of the lower lake. I crossed a single-arched bridge and climbed to the top of the ruin to a platform overlooking the tortuous water.

Thickly wooded country I saw, with trees coming right down to the water's edge: every colour of the spectrum was before my eyes. Red, gold, and russet



THE LAKES OF KILLARNEY.

A DURBAN RICKSHAWMAN.

of the trees and shrubs, blue of the water, purple of the mountains, and just below, the incredible green of the grass. And this colour pageant was mellowed by the softest of light. I thought of how this view had affected Edmund Spenser—

"As if it had by Nature's cunning hand
Been choycely picked out from all the rest
And laid forth for ensample of the best."

From the stone where I was standing, O'Donoghue, Prince of the Lakes, a powerful and kindly monarch, had jumped his horse into the lake when surrender to his enemies was made inevitable by the cutting off of his supplies by water. At times he quits the regions of immortal bliss and appears among the descendants of his people, bounding on his gallant white steed over the lake . . . .

We climbed the Torc mountain and saw the frosty waterfall cascading between autumn-tinted trees. The shiny-leafed arbutus, with its swinging big strawberries, holly, feathery ashes, or rowans—the mystic trees whose scarlet berries were the ambrosial food of the Gaelic gods. And shamrocks galore.

Then to the old Abbey of Irrelagh, or Mucross, at the foot of Mount Mangerton, to which one Florence McCarthy had fled with his love to be secretly married against the wishes of Queen Elizabeth.

We found an ivy-clothed ruin of a Franciscan monastery with Gothic window frames, standing in the shade of ancient ash, oak, yew, sycamore and elm trees. The cloisters have not decayed much. They are formed by an arcade of Gothic arches, with grey marble pillars. The effect produced is one of solemn quiet, and this is increased by a majestic yew rising like another column from the centre of the quadrangle.

By the peat fire that night, I tried to sum up what I had learnt of Eire, bearing well in mind how one feels about people who write books on Australia after a week's visit.

I had seen new hospitals erected out of the Irish sweep, and cultivated fields creeping up the mountain sides and over the plains, gradually replacing the bog. I was told that large absentee landholders were

gradually bought out by the Government, and the land split into small holdings. For the housing of labourers, the Government had built five and six-roomed stone cottages, the weekly rents of which ranged from 1/9 to 2/3 out in the country to 3/- to 4/- for more elaborate dwellings in the towns.

The education system, and the medical panel system, from what I could hear, seemed sound. The national language was being restored: the school children were being taught Gaelic, of which a working knowledge was necessary for any public service appointment.

In spite of the large volunteer army enrolled for defence, the war seemed very remote from gentle Eire. All the educated people I spoke to were definitely pro-British: many had menfolk in the British Army.

The pervading desire seemed to be similar to that of the Jews I afterwards met in Palestine—to make full use of the new facilities for developing their old country, which had been restored to them only some twenty years before. And with a deep-rooted religious fervour behind their efforts.

Back I went to England on the little "St. Patrick," afterwards split in two by a German bomber. Seated near me on the deck was a boy rather the worse for wear, slouch cap pulled over one eye. He was damning England hard. Pulled down our homes, she did. Well, her own houses are falling about her ears just now. Good enough for her. An Irish colonel returning to his regiment in England turned indignantly to the lad—

"Why do you go to England, if that is how you feel?"

"Got to follow my bloody job," the boy replied.

"The sort of thing you would do. Make your living and then abuse the country that employs you. What might your so-and-so job be, anyhow?"

The boy grinned.

"My job? I drive a bloody Spitfire!"

CHAPTER V

SOON after my return from Eire, the Colonel sent for me and announced that my promotion had come through, and I was to proceed "at once but not forthwith" to a hospital just north of London. It took eight hours to cover thirty-five miles. In and out of trains and buses—even old Waterloo was out of action that day!

From my point of view, that hospital was a heavenly spot, because I had no night duty and could just put my finger to my nose at Jerry when the banshee howled, stop in bed, tin hat on side of head, and go to sleep. Certainly, a land mine was dropped by parachute in the hospital grounds, but it caught on a tree and did not go off. The Navy came and took it away.

Emerson said that "to see England well needs a hundred years," and in his day travel was not impeded by bombed buildings, road blocks, and craters. The Commanding Officer of my new hospital knew how keen I was to see and learn England, and arranged that I should accompany some patients sent by ambulance down to Maidstone. The driver—a Springbok girl named Wilson—had been a 'cellist studying in London when war broke out. We drove along the "rolling Roman road," and always I was struck by the neatness of the countryside, the result of the industry of hundreds of generations. Did the Romans have to blaze a trail through forests to make this road, and would my own land ever show this well-groomed trimness? Say when some Government, finding millions for development instead of war, had dammed up Central Australia's rivers? It was difficult to believe: the contrast between England's quite orderliness and the hard-bitten straggly confusion of our bush was too great.

"You'd hate it, anyhow," declared my fellow-Colonial. "All this is delightful and perfectly fitting here, but oh! give me the open veldt!"

We were homesick together for a while, until we found a hotel where lunch and beer cheered us up.

On the return journey there was a calamity with the petrol. The electric change-over from one 12-gallon tank to the other just would not work, in spite of all our fiddling, so we had plenty of juice in the spare tank and none at all in that connected with the engine.

We borrowed a billycan from a house, crawled under Violet, the ambulance, and took out the bung of the full tank, whereupon Vi spat petrol so vehemently that we had to shut her mouth very promptly, but not before Wilson had sat in a pool of petrol and got her skirt soaked. For days afterwards the poor girl resembled a chimpanzee!

The driver of a passing R.A.F. truck stopped and put enough petrol in the empty tank to get us up to London. It was dark and after closing-time when we pulled in at Peckham. A blitz raging, and not a soul to be seen in the streets. At last a policeman directed us to a garage where he said somebody lived on the premises.

Somebody might have done so, but was not coming out! We nearly tore down the door of that garage, with fists, not bombs, and made the district ring with our curses and unseemly mirth. Still no answer. Nothing for it but to track down the policeman again.

He really was most kind and anxious to help us, and suggested that his guv'nor had a car and might be able to spare us a gallon. We trailed along with him to the shelter beneath his station. White-washed brick it was. Alas! the guv'nor was not playing: indeed he might almost have been in the Army, so well had he developed the "It's nothing to do with me" attitude!

Pulling up my scattered and weary wits, I suggested that perhaps he might have a piece of rubber tubing, with which we could syphon petrol from our nearly full tank! No, he hadn't—the most likely place to get tubing was at a fire station. Our nice kind bobby, by now an old pal, escorted me through the streets to the Fire Station, while Wilson coaxed Violet along.

London was completely deserted, no sign of life anywhere. Jerries zooming, searchlights meeting directly overhead, guns woofing. An occasional deafening crash as a bomb landed. A flop-flop-wallop

as a building collapsed. The sky bright with reflected fires.

At the wide high door of the Fire Station we asked our policeman if the fire engine would come charging out on top of us if we rang the bell. He thought not, but chose this moment to leave us, no doubt having had his fill of hysterical females.

We rang that bell. Back swung the door, revealing the gleaming engine towering above us. With a clatter, on to it dropped from surrounding galleries dozens of black-clad men, like so many ants, and the engine started, all in a manner of seconds.

With horror, Wilson and I suddenly realised that we had done all this! We fell, helpless with giggles, on to the bonnet. How childish it all seems now! But we were cold, worn out, and hungry, and desperately on the lookout for something to laugh at. The faces of those men provided it. We managed to gasp out "No fire!" and somebody closed the door. It was with an excusably dirty look that the boss came round and said—

"Did you ladies want anything?"

We straightened up and explained: we would not have been surprised had he smitten us to earth. But he was a Londoner, nothing disturbed him much, and he detailed a man to get us some tubing.

Out on the road again, the pair of us took turns at sucking up petrol and pouring it into a can—the very smell of petrol still recalls that night! And then—out came a fireman with a tray of tea and bread-and-jam sandwiches. Only his English reserve saved that man from being kissed on both cheeks. If ever he finds himself in Jo'burg or Melbourne, he need not starve while Wilson and I are alive!

So completely did that meal restore us that we were soon able to drive home singing through the rain and the blitz.

My Christmas was a bad show. All sorts of fun and games had been arranged at the hospital, but on 21st December I was ordered to a depot in a Midland town to await embarkation on active service to Heaven knew where . . . .

My Christmas dinner was eaten in a tenth-rate

boarding house, and in the afternoon the landlady went out, leaving me shivering alone by a horrid little coal fire. No cables or home mail. These caught up much later. Definitely not the traditional Christmas of Dickens and Washington Irving! No holly. No hilarity. I grafted like a beaver trying to knock out some Christmas carols from a piano that had seen better days, but too poignant memories washed over me of my choir-boy son and Christmases at home, when the clan forgathered, traditionally, to eat hot turkey and plum pudding in the sweat of their brow and a temperature of over a hundred degrees. It was too much: I crouched by the fire and howled like a dog!

After a while I pulled myself together and turned on the radio. Over the air came the voice of R. G. Menzies, Australia's Prime Minister, wishing a Merry Christmas to all Australians serving abroad. Like hell it was merry! But thanks so much, Mr. Menzies! Heavens! I was glad to hear you!

I had a most melancholy fortnight in this dismal manufacturing town, where there was nothing of interest. Anything beyond the city limit was "out of bounds." Fortunately, there was a famous and beautiful cathedral town only twenty miles away . . . As a matter of fact, I enjoyed my trips there very much indeed. After all, I could not have helped the war effort very greatly by sitting in my dismal bedroom having the hump!

Now one very remarkable thing about the attitude of the English people at that time was this. Nobody expected the Luftwaffe to be defeated in a few months. The matter was not discussed, but it was tacitly taken for granted by everyone that this state of thing was permanent—for the duration. But nobody moaned!

CHAPTER VI

AT last came a night when the dim blue lights of a northern railway station shed ghostly flickers on a draft of officers and men and one lone woman. Snow had melted, and clinging cold mud stuck to our feet, which felt dead to the knees. Above our heavy overcoats we wore a pack, a haversack, respirator and tin hat. I was also clutching a small suitcase and the precious typewriter. The slush on the platform made it impossible to put anything down. Jerry up top as usual.

After an hour of this, the train pulled in and I shared a carriage with three other officers, not one of whom had had the forethought to provide himself with a rug. So when the hot water pipes froze and the temperature dropped if possible lower, the four of us huddled under mine. God save Ireland and her Belfast rugs!

For the thousandth time did I curse the Australian military authorities whose refusal to accept service from women doctors had forced me across the world to all this inconvenience! Cramped I was as well as cold, owing to the fact that one young gentleman had fallen asleep with his heavy headful of brains on my shoulder. Next morning, I overheard him remark brightly that he had had a good sleep on the train.

"On me, you mean," I commented with much acidity, rubbing my stiff shoulder, without foreseeing that his was to be the hand, some months later, which would haul me, half drowning, out of the surf at Jaffa . . . .

After thirteen hours' travelling, the troop train decanted us on to a wharf, and to the heavenly comfort of a cup of tea. Then per launch to His Majesty's Transport XYZ, before the war a French luxury liner. A beautifully executed bronze of Louis Pasteur embellished the main staircase, and I remembered a clinician of my student days referring to him as "the second greatest benefactor of mankind." I hoped that his ghost would do a spot of benefacting in my direction, when it dawned on me that of the 3445 souls on board

that ship, only one was a woman's soul! It was frightful, there was no part of the deck set aside for officers, so everywhere I moved I was surrounded by massed humanity in the form of surprised Tommies. My own Diggers would at least have said, "Good God, what's that?" but the B.E.F. just opened its mouth and gaped. For a girl of my gentle and retiring disposition, it was trying, to say the least. My Australian friends might not recognise me from this description. But for the honour of my country, for two and a half years I imitated a perfect lady, although the effort nearly killed me.

A sumptuous cabin was mine, with "chaud" and "froid" on the taps, and walls of scarlet satin brocade covered with white carnations—a room in luxury worthy of a king's mistress. It lacked one detail—a door! All doors had been removed, in case they should jamb in an emergency, and only a flapping curtain separated me from the hordes of His Majesty's armed forces.

It was disconcerting the way a head would appear, and a bass voice ask—

"I say, old boy, have you a spare razor blade—oh, my God!"

I felt inclined to lurk in my cabin for the duration of the voyage, but hunger forced me out for meals, after a good look at the "Keep your tail up" motto on my tin hat. This, with respirator and lifebelt, was never allowed out of reach. Some hospitable Scottish engineers let me share their table . . . .

For two days we lay at anchor, then someone conceived the bright idea of transferring me to a ship carrying nurses as well as troops. Among the hulks of naval craft and troopships, the little launch threaded its way, and to my delight stopped chugging beside a dark monster, over the deck rails of which protruded hundreds and hundreds of the slouch hats of the second A.I.F.!

"You'll be sorry"—the usual greeting to the new recruit—lustily yelled the owners of the hats as my foot clawed for the swaying rope ladder. Sorry, indeed! All I could think of, as I scrambled up that bit

of glorified string, was the delightful certainty that a score of those wild devils would dive in after me if I slipped!

The joy of being welcomed by one of my husband's old students, and by nursing sisters whom I had known, in Melbourne! The finding of a cousin, and the fiance of one of my best friends! It was veritably the next best thing to going home. Literally the happiest moment of my life, as all the loneliness, depression and homesickness of the past months gave way to the warmth and companionship of "my ain folk."

I was promptly invited to a party in the cabin of O.C. Troops, a kind, happy Scot, known to the sisters as "Uncle Doug." The organiser of a world tour could not have taken greater thought for the comfort and well-being of everyone on the ship. Nobody seemed to have any dark worries praying on his mind; everyone was content. Diggers did their parades cheerfully and initiated the few Tommy units aboard in the mysteries of two-up!

There was a dapper young Londoner from Bart's, who had alternately kept a pub, run a night-club, and owned a garage in the intervals of doing his medical course.

I watched two captains from my own city kick off their shoes, roll up their pants and lie on their bellies tracking down a stoppage in a drain, to the amazement of the English officers. One English sister had a "squeeze-box," and we had happy sing-songs in her cabin.

The bedroom steward to attend "the ladies" was a relic from the days when that ship had carried millionaires, not troops. Kindly and dignified as an archbishop, Paddy had the unenviable job of training several muscular Diggers for bedroom stewards. An Australian would describe them as being "rough as bags." Perfect dears, though. The one detailed to me polished my shoes and buttons, addressed me as "Auntie," and naively brought me his torn shirts to mend. At times I thought it might be easier to do my own polishing, and save the tails of my shirts for my own use! I cut off so many pieces for patching the lingerie of Diggers and Tommies on that nine

weeks' voyage that my shirts all ended up as blouses!

Our convoy was being augmented daily — long narrow cruisers and destroyers, and one day a little corvette, the "Parramatta," built at Sydney docks, was greeted with yells, cooees, and howls of "You'll be sorry!" from thousands of throats. All this time we were still lying in a British port, but I was so happy in the atmosphere of home that I did not care when we sailed.

Then fell a cruel blow. Somebody had thrown a spanner in the works of the ship from which I had been transferred, the engines would not start, and all on board had been ordered to return to their depots to await the next convoy. And I was to return with them! We were told only that the move was due to engine trouble.

Back to the cold, to another night in the troop train, to those frigid billets, after having had just this taste of Paradise!

"Not on your life," said I, and coaxed the Adjutant to take ashore a telegram to the W.O. asking that I might be permitted to travel with my countrymen.

"It's O.K.," that gentleman announced an hour later, his eyes twinkling. "I got your Chief on the telephone, and as soon as I read out your wire he said, 'For God's sake take that bloody woman out of England!' "

The Adj. was probably pulling my leg about that, I am sure the austere brass hat did not have it in him! Anyhow, official orders confirmed the fact that I alone of my draft was to be allowed to proceed.

At last arrived the day when our huge Armada steamed out of port, led by a battleship. Up till then, it was the largest convoy in military history to have left the shores of the United Kingdom.

Grey and black leviathans, rising out of the sea, each keeping its allotted place in the line. Cruisers on each side of the convoy, destroyers at the periphery. The fog at last had lifted, and hills, pink and misty, rose to port and starboard, the pastel gold and rose of the morning clouds contrasting with the azure and white of the water. From time to time there flew over us, like guardian angels, a squadron of Hurri-

canes, and a seaplane from our battleship. Altogether a most impressive sight.

And one experienced a very eerie sensation, as a cog in the wheel of this immense force rolling forward to "an unknown destination." I thought of Tennyson's "Ulysses."

"Come, my friends,
'Tis not too late to seek another world.
Push off, and, sitting well in order, smite
The sounding furrows; for my purpose holds
To sail beyond the sunset, and the baths
Of all the western stars until I die.
It may be that the gulfs will wash us down . . ."

Little did we guess that many on board were to die or be taken prisoner in Greece, Crete, or Syria. And some would become "Rats of Tobruk."

All sorts of rumours flew about as to our destination, and odds were laid on it. As the days passed, and our course kept west by north, the bookies on the lower decks favoured Iceland! Cold was the weather, with much wind and hail. Sunrise was not till 10.30: after breakfast one morning a ship was seen sailing in a silvery band of moonlight. It was weird.

At last we turned south, and one day steamed into Freetown, the capital of Sierra Leone, to the tune of an air raid which turned out to be "all cackle and no egg!"

The Diggers seemed to consider me a kind of mascot. At the foot of Orders, the second day out, was appended a note, "Yes, she is a Major!" Yarning to the boys filled a large part of my day, and of the comparative advantages of Melbourne and Sydney I heard more than ever before.

Wireless news was relayed daily. Australia's Prime Minister, Mr. R. G. Menzies, had arrived in England—

"Gawd," grinned a Digger—"He wasn't game to come while we were there!"

The Germans claimed to have sunk one of our convoy. Everyone tore to the starboard windows, but there was our "Empress," steaming unconcernedly in her usual place. Hitler would have blenched to hear

what the boys had to say about Germans and their lies!

Life fell into a cheerful routine, some of us studying Arabic with an officer who had spent four years as a "regular" in Egypt. A big Queenslander of tough aspect, William was the envied possessor of a eucalyptus leaf. Sometimes as a great treat, he would light the end of it with his cigarette. For a glorious minute, before he snuffed it out, we smelt the aroma of our own bush!

Church Parade was grand. The Altar on the boat deck, covered with two Union Jacks, the Padre, khaki trousers showing beneath his cassock, and a really good band recruited from Sailors, Tommies and Diggers. The troops sat on their life belts—Mae Wests, they called them—rising to sing lustily the old chants and hymns. The Padre had served in the ranks in the First World War, and knew the kind of sermon to give them.

Listening to the familiar prayers, I thanked God for the old C. of E. service, surely one of the few unchanging links that bind the Anglo-Saxon race the world over.

CHAPTER VII

DURBAN was the first port where we were allowed ashore. Natal's capital presented low hilly cliffs clothed with dark green trees and brick-red paths cutting through. A modern clean-looking city, with wide streets. Built on the harbour, it was reminiscent of some of the newer parts of Sydney. The Diggers delighted in the famous rickshaw men, whose shiny black bodies and enormous feather head-dresses were quite new to them. One man I saw having a new experience. Perched inside his own rickshaw, and looking very uncomfortable, he was being drawn by three laconic Diggers through the streets!

The hospitality we received was terrific. Every woman who had a car turned out to meet the convoy and to drive us along the wide streets, over the Umgeni River, and up a hill whence we looked over all the lights of the city. Tram and bus rides were free.

Doing some shopping the next morning, I was asked by a school-girl if I would care to have tea with her mother? We sat on her verandah overlooking the harbour and the blaze of colour that was Durban's Botanical Gardens. Tea was served by an Indian bearer. The corresponding class of Australian hostess would probably have had to leave me and go to the kitchen to get the tea. It struck me then that it is the women in my country who bear the burden of the White Australia Policy.

Back to the transport at night, where Tommies and Diggers, arm-in-arm, were helping one another up the gangways with much fraternity and conviviality.

Suez—our port of disembarkation. Journey's End. Deep gratitude to the Navy, who had made possible the uneventful passage of this great force. The tense excitement of disembarkation. Where were we all going? Rumours of Palestine. The koala bears, boomerangs and kookaburras which had cheered the cabins all packed up, the deck strangely tidy with no sewing or books lying about.

Three days did we lie in Suez Harbour, and sharks came around for our garbage. The sun shone hotly on the monument at Port Tewfic at the entrance to the Canal. High bare cliffs rose up from the sea, cliffs which were apricot and soft purple when the sun shone, changing to faint gold and brown at twilight. Rumour had it that we were to have gone on to Haifa, but that the Canal had been mined and blocked by a sunken ship . . . .

One night, just before a raid, we went for a "walk-about" and awoke twenty-five miles down the Red Sea, opposite an Arab village of squat flat-topped mud huts, surrounded by date palms and goats. We were back in port again for breakfast. An unloading gang came aboard, their dark bodies covered by bedraggled, long, very off-white gowns and torn European coats. Red tarbushes or dirty Arab headdresses worn turban-wise. They lifted hatches and hauled cases. The only time an Arab is a silent worker is when he is rifling one's tent: at other times every action is accompanied by much intense conversation. Their foreman urged them to greater efforts with shrill rapid gabbling, and much waving of arms overhead.

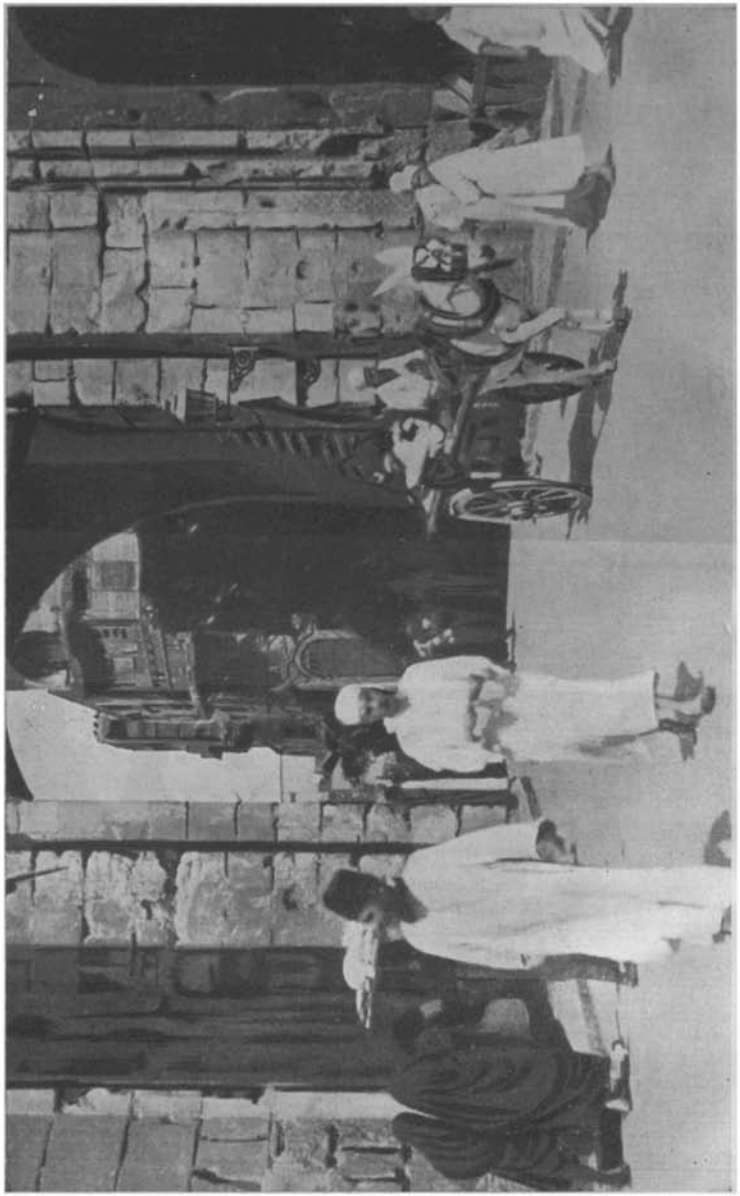
"Wants a game of two-up," said a Digger watching him. "But nobody will play."

Then came flat-bottomed barges which took off the Australian sisters and troops, the boys shouting and singing. The ship was quiet that night!

The following day at noon, with the English sisters, I was put into a train and, although it was not due to leave till five, told to stay there. Iron rations—bully and biscuits — were washed down by tea I had scrounged from Paddy and made on my precious boy-scout outfit.

At six o'clock, that train was still sitting there like a broody hen trying to hatch out a door knob, so a few of us climbed out on the line and went in search of more tea. No luck! But we stretched our legs and met some of the sights and smells—dirty flat houses of cracked mud bricks, shy veiled women carrying babies with sticky eyes, while their black gowns were clutched by little dark boys and girls in ankle-length

A CAMEL TRAIN.



I SET OUT TO SEE CAIRO.

gowns. Their lords drank coffee in out-door cafes. Plaintive Egyptian music, up and down a scale of about five notes, all minor. No less than twelve women in a cart drawn by a jennet.

Suddenly came a transformation. The air-raid siren howled shrilly, and great was the scatter. Men and women looking like beetles on the wing, their black cloaks billowing as they raced to the shelters. What a contrast to the unhurried processions in London's streets under similar conditions! "Here are the Jerries again! I suppose we had better go down the shelter."

Back to the train, only to find that the engine's Gyppo. crew had gone to ground. It was after nine when that wretched train at last got under weigh, so we pulled in at a suburb of Cairo at the nice convenient hour of 2 a.m.

The sisters were met and taken to their hospital, officers and men marched off promptly to a transit camp. Efficiency! But nobody seemed to be interested in me! Forlornly I searched out the R.T.O.'s office, only to find that through some oversight my name was not on his list, and, he explained somewhat coldly, it took him all his time to look after the people for whom that document actually made him responsible. No, no use telephoning for a taxi. There were none to be had. Wearily I trudged in search of my camp-bed, to erect it among the hen-coops on the platform and get a little sleep before morning . . . .

Suddenly a taxi rattled up to the station, but into it stepped a Very Senior Officer, complete with golf clubs, camp kit, and multitudinous odd baggage. I threw myself on his mercy and begged to share the solitary taxi, but into his eye came that old familiar "That bloody woman" look. I had happily forgotten it on the troopship! Grudgingly he agreed to give me a lift to Cairo, if I could find room amongst his luggage, but he stipulated that I was to bring none of my own. It seemed a bit hard, as he was probably not going to use the golf clubs before sunrise, but I saluted and accepted with respectful gratitude. Blast him!

Arrived at Cairo's leading hotel, he was treated as

the personification of British prestige, and conducted with salaams to his room. Not so I!

"All rooms booked, Madame."

Miserable again, with all the old desolation and homesickness sweeping over me, plus the visceroptotic feeling of one who has eaten nothing for fifteen hours, I laid my weary frame on a couch in the foyer, and was just about asleep when the hotel staff went into a huddle and decided to give me a room.

I giggled weakly when I discovered that this was next to that which enveloped the august slumbers of the Very Senior Officer. It had a communicating door between! All through the next day, a white-robed valet, wearing a scarlet tarbush and belt, kept delivering to me messages intended for him. Conversations went something like this—

Valet: Zere is a message for ze Brigadier.

Me: Well, take it to the Brigadier.

Valet: But ze Brigadier is out.

Me: Put it in his room, then.

Valet: I bring it to you. He has to do wiz you—

Me: Indeed, he has nothing to do with me!

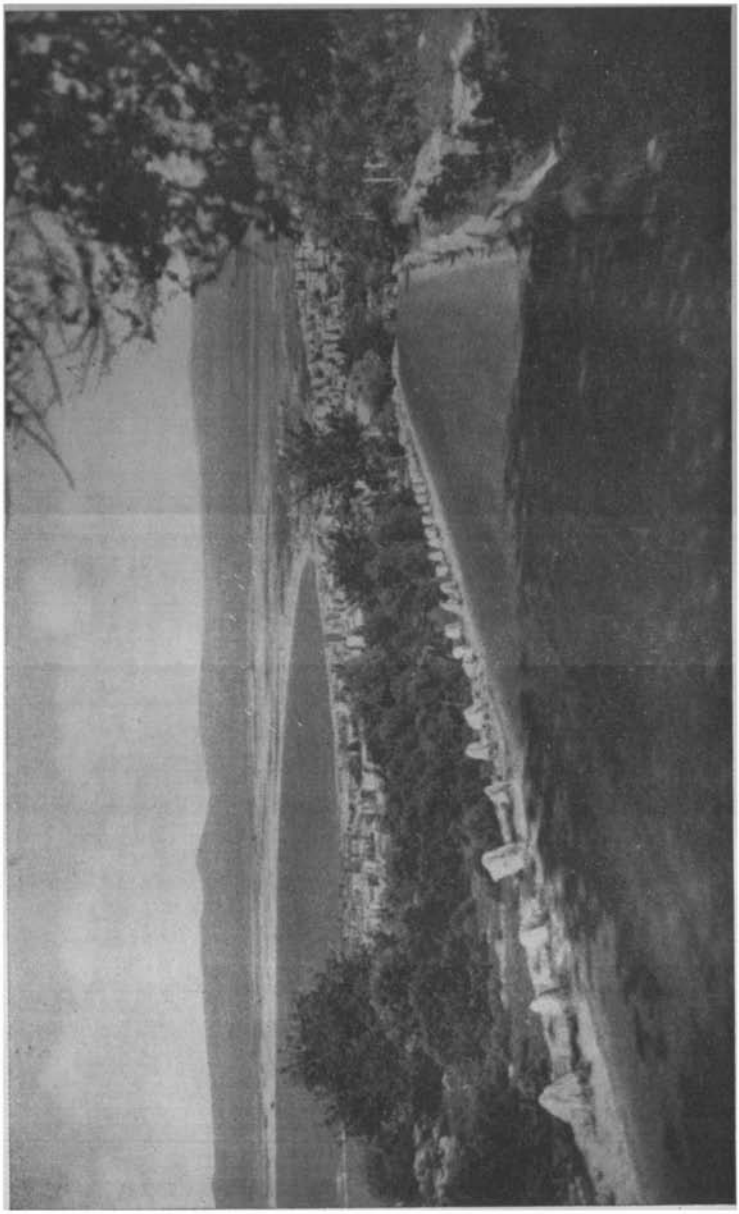
Valet (firmly): But you come wiz him.

Me: Oh, hell! Imshi!

On the following day, with the determination of a small dentist drawing teeth from a large pugilist, I screwed ten pounds from reluctant Authority—"Advance of Pay," they were pleased to call it. Seeing that I had had no pay for three months, I thought the term rather a misnomer. Each officer had been permitted to bring ten pounds only from England, and that had to last a nine weeks' boat trip including four days in Durban. How the smokers got on—So with an illusion of wealth almost equal to that with which the locals credited me, I set off to see Cairo.

"I," impressively announced a sombre-eyed Egyptian on the hotel steps, "I am Moses." Except for the absence of the patriarchal beard, he might well have been an apparition of the prophet. Tall and aquiline, the slope of his forehead carried upwards by his red tarbush, he walked with all the dignity of ancient Egypt, and his Assam silk gown flapping round

THE RIVER NILE.



A BITUMEN ROAD WOUND UP THE SLOPES OF MOUNT CARMEL.

his sandals seemed quite in keeping with the staff he carried. Moses did a spot of soothsaying "on the side," and showed me a letter from an ex-tourist asking his advice about an investment!

How unfitting it seemed to go to the Pyramids by tram! At the terminus, I mounted with many misgivings a camel, complete with red carpet, mange, the odour of the glamorous East, and an expression of utter distaste for all it saw, including myself. Its owner led it by a rope: he clucked like a hen. I was terrified that the clucking might make the thing gallop: however, when the driver stopped clucking the camel stopped moving, so all was well.

Of all my sight-seeing around Egypt, the thing that has remained most firmly fixed in my mind is the expression on the face of the sphinx. It is one of ineffable benevolence, wisdom, and strength, and I have never seen it caught by any photographer.

CHAPTER VIII

HEADQUARTERS, stationed then on the top floor of the hotel, ordered me off to Jerusalem, handing me a rail warrant and sleeper ticket. All very simple and matter-of-fact.

So I gathered up my kit and the mangled remains of the ten pounds advanced on the previous day (the hotel bill was colossal, but some of it was to be refunded later by the Army) and embarked per taxi to Cairo Central Railway Station.

Alas! my only ten-piastre piece shocked and grieved that Gyppo taxi driver. He eyed it as though it were something singled out for particular disfavour by the Prophet, bit it, spat past it, and with violent gesticulation and bitter verbal recrimination, pronounced it a bad one! I tried to explain that it was the only one I had, except for a few odd coins for luggage porters; but my "falouse mafeesh" left him incredulous—garrulously so! I consoled myself for my unwitting dishonesty and for walking off in the midst of his lamentations by the thought that, whoever might be the loser, it would not be himself: he would assuredly palm off the bad coin on his next fare!

The train soon left behind that cosmopolitan city known to all except the British as Le Caire, and entered the real Egypt, the Egypt of the Rameses who oppressed the Israelites, of Tutankhamen, of the Persians, of Alexander, of Cleopatra—

The sun went down in a blaze of colour which intensified the gold of the sand all round. I thought of the picture post cards the Diggers used to send home from the last war, and how exaggerated we had all thought the colouring must be. Now those brilliant tones were here before my eyes, in the sunset which had shown these variations, nearly seven thousand years ago, to the Great King Menes, who had united the provinces of Upper and Lower Egypt.

In that glow as of all the world's firelights, I could imagine the figures of the great ones of the past who had traversed these sands—Queen Hetsheput, the first

feminist, who showed her step-son Thothmes how to rule—the benevolent Aknaton who lived only for his people and advocated the worship of the Sun, the source of all life—then those who had conquered Egypt, the Persians, the Greeks, the Romans, the French, the British—this sunset had illuminated them all. No wonder the soil was rich where irrigation channels flowed, with so much "rich dust" beneath! Corn, sugar and cotton I saw round these palm-fringed canals, for which, Moses the guide had told me, Egypt had to thank "The Lord the Kitchener."

Late at night the train pulled in at el Kantara, which means "the Bridge," but which is actually a ferry across the Suez Canal, surrounded by an Arab village. Bright moonlight silvered the sand beside the pale blue strip of water. It seemed incongruous to find within a stone's throw of the canal a suburban railway station and the single pair of rails wandering off into the desert.

But the scene had one feature only too familiar. It was being blitzed! No sign of a luggage porter, as the fit and proper place for a true son of the Faithful, when the siren sounds, is underground, not operating trains and ferries! So each passenger lumped his own luggage and a soldier drove the ferry across the canal.

Into the train for Palestine—on past el Arish, where a signboard "Palestine" denoted the boundary between Egypt and that country. Here was a glimpse of the moonlit Mediterranean, white foam breaking on sands from which rose stately date-palms. On past two heaps of ruins, which had once been "Great Pelusium, built by Grecian Kings." Now a pile of mud. But this mud had once received the feet of Cambyses, Xerxes, Mark Antony, and not far from here there dropped before his assassin the body of the conquering Pompey.

The railway follows a caravan track that is almost as old as time. Along this very route had passed the Holy Family, fleeing from Palestine to Egypt from the cruelty of Herod. Looking away from the train I felt all this might have happened only yesterday, so unchanging did this eternal sand appear in the moonlight. To-day and yesterday just merged in this country.

I fell asleep at last, lulled by the jogging of the train, and the next thing I saw was the black but uncomely face of the train conductor, saying something about morning. I thought he was asking me to X-ray Mark Antony to see how far his sword had penetrated into his body! But at last the sight of a cup of tea got me awake properly, awake to grassy granity hills arising in the near distance. Grass! How nice to see it! Grass surrounding blue and red anemones around the railway line, and grass among the stones of the dry wady beds fringed with tamarisk. Great indeed must have been the joy of the Israelites entering into this land of "milk and honey" after their wanderings in the sandy wastes of Egypt and Sinai!

We changed trains at Lydda, the City of England's Patron Saint. A few miles on and Jerusalem came into sight. The Mount of Olives, the Mosque of Omar on the site of Solomon's Temple .... It was only afterwards that I realised how strange it was to have recognised Jerusalem immediately by the vivid descriptions that have been written. It is indeed a city of contrasts. The Old City. The huge pile of the Y.M.C.A. Somehow one does not feel jolted here by the contrast. There is such a jumble of religions in Jerusalem that there is nothing jarring about the proximity of the Old City and the Y.M.C.A.

The Holy City—and yet I think the sight that affected me most on that first day was the flag of my own country gently furling and spreading its Union Jack and Southern Cross over the building which housed the Australian Club!

A great welcome did I receive there from the Chief of the Comforts Fund and Diggers revelling in the amenities of the Club. A woman in khaki was a novelty in Palestine in March, 1941, and at least thirty tanned soldiers earnestly asked me to have a beer. No, the invitations were not all accepted! After lunch, a self-appointed squad conducted me to British Headquarters "just to see the Pommies give you a fair go!"

The "fair go" consisted of an appointment at Nazareth and a beautiful drive thence in a station wagon, a vehicle about the size of a utility truck, with

transverse seats built in like those of a small bus, shiny weatherboard sides, and wide sedan-car windows.

Back through the Judaean mountains, along the winding macadamised Jerusalem-Jaffa highway, three officers and I were driven by an R.A.S.C. Tommy. Among the granite outcrops in the grass were terraces of olive trees: they appeared so gnarled and stunted. Creamy rock walls everywhere, which like the olive trees, gave the impression of great age. Cedars and cypresses.

We passed a little stone building, which consisted of a single room domed like a beehive. I discovered later that this marked a holy place, or mukam, where lay the body of some famous chieftain or Moslem saint. All creamy white like the rocks. It was safe for workmen to keep their tools inside a mukam.

Grazing by the road were some hornless scrubby cattle. Black-cloaked women walked smoothly with pitchers on their heads. Fields were demarcated by hedges of prickly pear, evidently not a noxious weed in Palestine! Ever so often appeared a flock of sheep —twenty or thirty—led by a shepherd carrying a "staff" and clad in a long white gown. The Arab headdress (kaffiyeh) is a square of cotton about the size of a breakfast cloth, one corner of which is held on the head by two circles of plaited black wool called an ageyl. Even so had David tended his flocks on these very mountains!

I always found difficulty in accepting such a handful of sheep as a "flock": they reminded me of my mother's pet lambs which were kept segregated from the thirty thousand sheep comprising the stock of the station on which I lived as a child. Large and long in the wool were these Palestinian sheep, with wide tails about six inches across, and in the size of beast and length of wool—but not its texture—they resembled Lincolns. One seldom saw a completely white sheep. They were brown, black, brown and black, a few brown and white. Often there were goats among them almost of similar size and colour, so that one realised the significance of the Biblical mention of separating the sheep from the goats. The original sorter could not

have been a very assiduous worker, judging by the result!

Then came a paddock full of horses, mostly beauties, but with a few scrags among them, and this, said the Tommy, was the Army Convalescent Horse Depot. We entered a large barracks. Many cypress trees and cedars grew around buildings erected during the last war, and we passed out along an avenue of trees with large shiny leaves, which I was delighted to recognise as the currajong, or bottle-tree of our bush, whose large juicy roots were much sought after by the aborigines as food and drink.

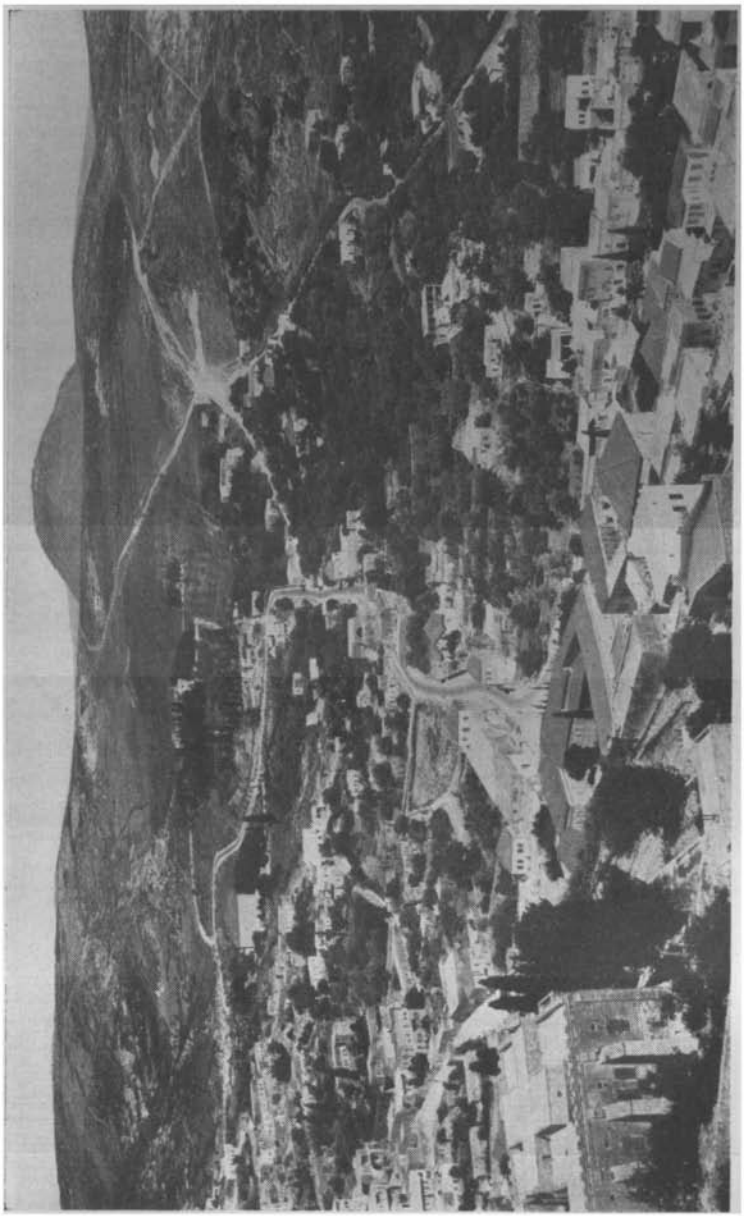
Jaffa, the Joppa of the New Testament, was called in Old Hebrew Yafo, meaning "The Beautiful." The modern portion has wide streets, and in the main one is a plantation of lawns, palms and other trees, and brilliant flower borders. Old Jaffa is perched on a headland overlooking the Mediterranean and the reef where, mythology has it, the beautiful Andromeda was chained for sacrifice to the sea-monster.

Jaffa has been the port of Jerusalem from Biblical times, and to Jaffa did David and Solomon cause to be floated down from Tyre the cedars of Lebanon used in the building of the Temple. The city has been conquered by Greeks, Arabs, Crusaders (whose principal landing port it was), Turks, and French under Napoleon. For thirteen centuries it has seen the landings of pilgrims starting out for Mecca, and now (i.e., before the war!) of the Jews returning to the Promised Land.

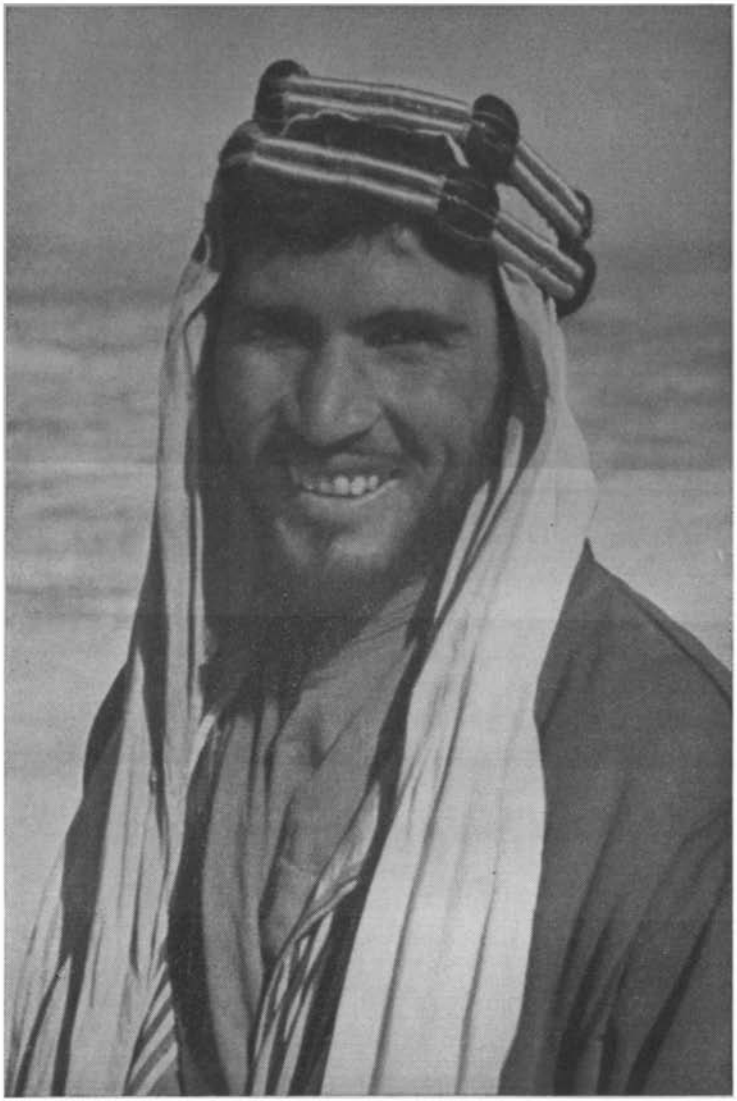
Just up the beach, opposite Tel Aviv, lay the wreck of a pilgrim ship. Jews hounded out of Europe just before the war, by the world's modern monster, chartered this ship and sailed around seeking vainly for a country that would offer them hospitality. Even Palestine's quota for that year was full. So the captain ran the ship aground (so goes the story) and the Jews had to be allowed ashore. And there lay the wrecked hull, starkly symbolic of "man's inhumanity to man."

St. Paul set out on his travels from this city. And we drive through it in a station-wagon!

To reach Tel Aviv from Jaffa, one simply crosses a



THE VILLAGE OF NAZARETH, WITH MOUNT TABOR ON THE SKYLINE.



MOSLEMS IN NAZARETH WEAR A FLOWING KAFFIYEH.

street. This new city of the Jews has sprung since the foundation of the Home in Palestine from a small Arab village. Modern shops and houses, picture theatres, cafes—"The Hill of Spring" is surely unique among the cities of this part of the world in having no "old" quarter. Apart from Hebrew the language spoken by the shop keepers was German, as against the French of commercial Cairo.

We drove north over plains where red earth showed warmly through patches of grass. With dramatic suddenness the terrain changed to desert. Then as abruptly came another change to plantations of citrus groves. Acres of refreshing green, and the heavy scent of orange blossom recalled the orchards drawn up from the desert of my own State of Victoria by soldiers settled on the land after the last war. Further north along the coast we caught glimpses of the Mediterranean to our left. Along those beaches had the Phoenicians of old collected the shell-fish which yielded the famous purple dye.

Then ahead loomed the long range of Mount Carmel, "the Garden of God." It was surmounted by the Carmelite Monastery, whose orange-red dome overlooked on one side the sea, and on the other the Plain of Esdraelon. On this mountain Elijah had lived and Elisha . . . .

Haifa is a comparatively new city. Between the lower slopes of Mount Carmel and the sea we found the Arab quarter, seething with business. It was a Sunday afternoon, therefore both Jewish and Arab shops were open. Shopping in Palestine was a matter of careful dating, for Arab shops closed of course on Friday, and Jewish on Saturday, but they all made up for lost time on our Sabbath.

Up and up the mountain side wound the bitumen road. Where Elijah the Tishbite had trudged with his staff were hundreds of houses and shops—well built of shell-pink stone—with trees galore and gardens. Another sign of the industry and success of the Zionist Movement. In this upper part of Haifa few Arabs were to be seen. Our troops shopping, and Jews well-dressed in European clothes filled the steep main street.

Headquarters was situated in a lovely garden. Away to the west sparkled the Mediterranean, blue as our Australian waters. I had never really appreciated the rich colouring common to both until I knew the pale grey-green of Britain's surrounding seas. Northward, snow-capped Hermon rose exquisite against the harebell sky.

We descended the mount and drove through the Galilean hills, past a "eucalyptus copse," a plantation of what looked to me like Citriodora put in to drain what had been a malarial swamp. There was something not quite right about this piece of landscape, I puzzled over it until all at once I realised that the gum-trees had been planted symmetrically in rows like fruit trees! What a contrast to their natural habitat—my wild and straggly bush! Their own mothers would never have recognised those gum-trees, so neat and tidy were they! Beneath the shade, by the side of the road, stalked three black and white herons, distant cousins no doubt to Australia's red-faced brolgas, who dance and bow to one another in a stately minuet.

At intervals along the valley through which wound the road, we saw wells, equipped with wooden pumps worked by Arab women, black garbed as usual. On we drove past an enormous concrete building with a tower —the local police post and a busy spot during the "trouble" of 1938.

Dramatically as we rounded a bend, the village of Nazareth appeared below, nestling in a valley and climbing a steep hillside. Its churches, high convent walls, cypress trees like dark steeples, and chiming bells made but a jumbled impression on me as I staggered into the Hotel Galilee and succumbed to an attack of the malady classified by my countrymen on the ship as "crook in the guts." My first real illness, and was I sorry for myself! I'd sooner have another baby any day—one does at least have some reward for one's pains!

One of the surgeons, hearing of my plight, came down daily and brought me not only medicines, but flowers! One has to be really ill, away from home, to appreciate such kindness.

CHAPTER IX

ON recovery I found the hospital situated in the Terra Sancta Monastery, a large modern building taken over from Italian monks at the outbreak of war. Holy Ground indeed—within the walls was the cave where the Carpenter's shop is said to have been. Flowers, shrubs, trees.

My particular place of toil was in the Casa Nova, down a cobbled little alleyway. There I found my staff, a sergeant and a private, engaged in what they fondly imagined to be cleaning the department prior to the Commanding Officer's inspection on the following day. They were going about it in the dilettante fashion of the strong sex faced with a little housework. I joined in and scrubbed the dirt off the doors and cupboards and showed them how we housewives "do" the floor. They will make excellent husbands for someone after the war, those two Tommies of mine!

And a beautiful floor it was, of marbled mosaic. From his niche in the wall a holy saint looked down on our labours. That particular "Colonel's inspection" did not take place. I did not mind, as we had got a good clean up out of it, but Sergeant, sotto voce to his assistant Joe, diagnosed all commanding officers as the offspring of sergeant-majors and native tarts!

Work in such surroundings took on a wierd fascination. I left it to the padres to argue about the authenticity of the Carpenter's shop site, content to realise that anyway somewhere within a stone's throw Christ had worked, too. Perhaps He had made wooden ploughs in the same way as an old man down the road, with whom I became friends.

I used to stand and watch this old fellow, squatting outside his shop, his headdress trailing on the ground while his brown eyes and hooked nose bent over the task of whetting a curved knife and whittling the tree branches into handle, shaft, and furrow. Then when the plough was completed, the purchaser would call for

it and fold it on top of his donkey. He then rode off on the unencumbered portion of the donkey's rump.

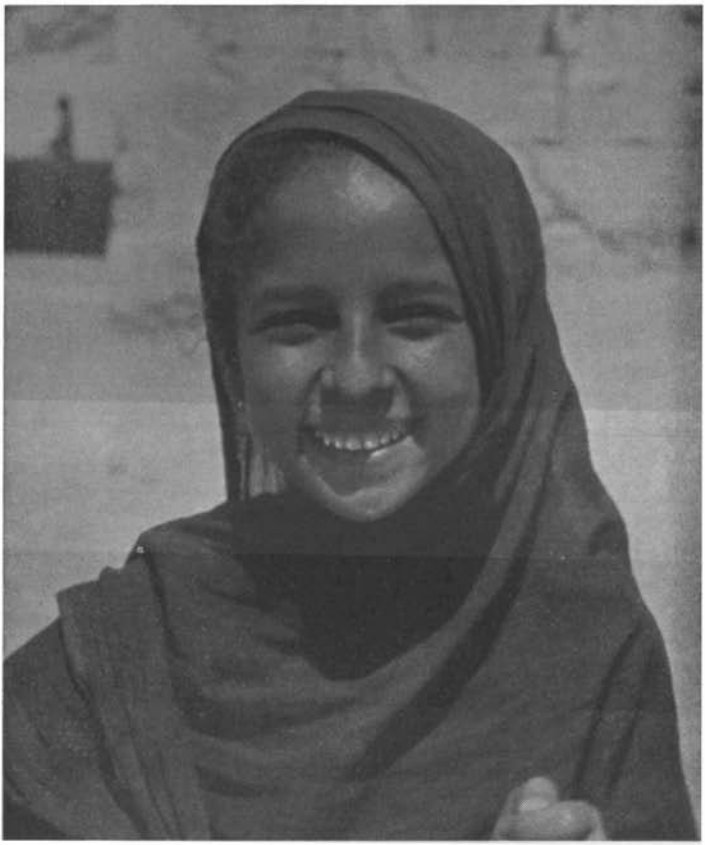
I liked to wander round the suq, or market, and watch those knives being made in the blacksmith's. The market shops opened on to a narrow steep street, cobbled, and by day the wood or iron shop-front was completely removed. Sometimes a projecting blind gave shelter from the sun. Shoppers and donkeys shared the roadway, perhaps six feet wide.

In the corner of the blacksmith's was a heap of horns, sheep's and goat's horns mixed, as in life. These provided the shafts, to which the man attached the blades when he had finished shaping and grinding them on his emery wheel. I always received a jolt when I saw Arabs in native costume doing the work of skilled mechanics with our machinery!

Next door was a draper's, with a counter at the back and the wares on shelves. Grinning small boys hung about ready to pounce on a prospective customer and escort him to a shop selling the desired article. Next an ironmonger's, then a copper beater's. Little trays did he make out of sheet copper, with piecrust edges and the word "Nazareth" engraved above a conventional Arabic design.

I came to love these Nazarene Arabs, they always took one down in such a charming, friendly fashion, obviously with no offence meant! Quite different from the cold-blooded commercialism of some Haifa and Tel Aviv shopkeepers. When not smiling, though, any one of them looked as if he would cut one's throat for ninepence.

Between the hospital and the hotel was an outdoor cafe, with little tables and chairs where all day long the hawk-beaked enjoyed their talk over coffee. Christian Arabs—about 8% of the population—wore European clothes and gave their children English names. It was strange to see that many were blue-eyed—these were said to be descendants of the Crusaders. The Moslems wore the flowing kaffiyeh and long white gown over trousers full in the seat and tight over the calves, or else European clothes with a red tarbush. They all seemed of much purer stock



THE CHILDREN WERE ADORABLE.

. . . SMOKING A BRASS AND GLASS NARGILEH.

than the polyglot natives of Egypt, and I never saw a really black face on a Palestinian Arab.

The children were adorable—little girls and boys alike wore long gowns, and the boys affected crochet caps tight-fitting like egg cosies, and worked in various colours. Many of the men wore these beneath their kaffiyehs.

Ali, the hospital paper boy, was a happy urchin always up to his neck in mischief. He grinned the grin of a successful merchant one day when he palmed off a week-old newspaper on Sarge, whose boot missed him by millimetres. On a seat outside the hospital sat old Mary, a cheerful crone whose smile would have provided ideal copy for the "before" advertisement for someone's toothpaste. She worked all day at the famous Nazareth lace, which she sold to the sisters and men on leave visiting the town. I was pleased to be taken by Mary to her house in a garden, where the old husband squatted on the kitchen floor, picking the husks off a basket of wheat, while in one corner of the room was tethered a sheep!

What a fraction of eternity is two thousand years, I thought, watching women and little girls passing under the arch above the Virgin's Well and setting off with their pitchers on their heads. How they could balance a petrol tin full of water was a mystery to me until I noticed that beneath the tin each woman placed over the crown of her head a sort of quoit made of twisted black cloth.

I went to a service in Nazareth's beautiful Church of England, which is situated among flat-roofed Arab houses. The congregation was almost entirely Arab and the priest was an Arab, yet the service was in English. The same old Anglican ritual, beautifully spoken.

Bells rang throughout the day, and sometimes at intervals throughout the night. There had been a drought, and the Jews had prayed for rain on Saturday, the Christians on Sunday, but no rain fell. But when on the following Friday the Moslems held a Day of Prayer—down came the rain! Definitely one up for the All-Merciful.

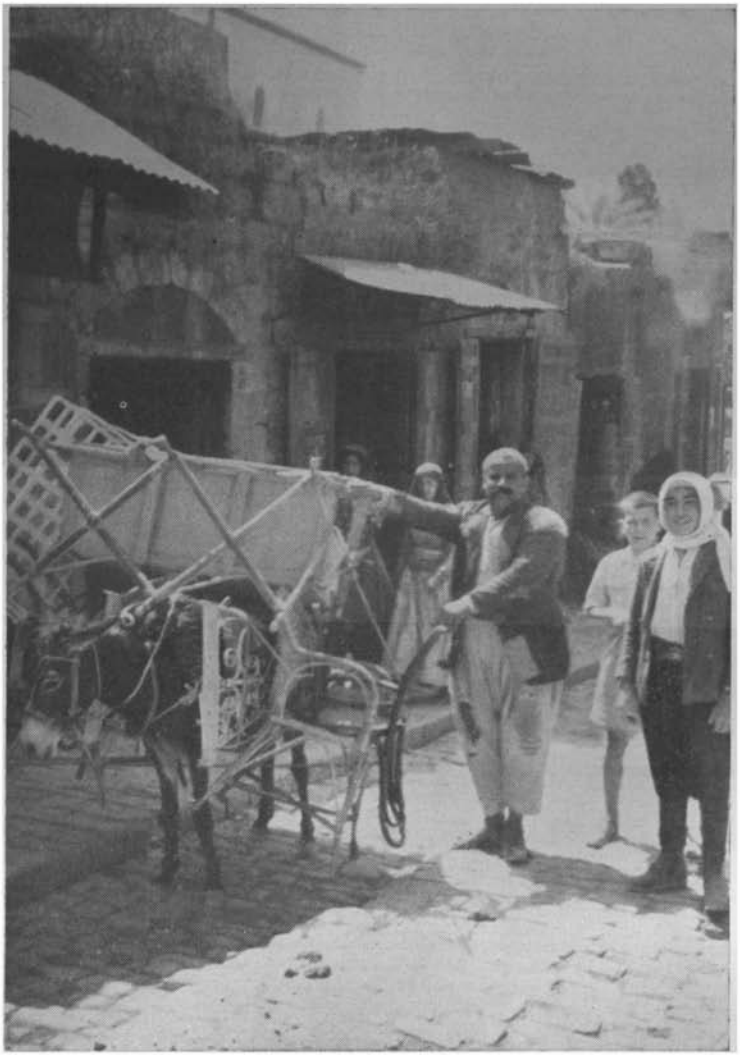
I was told this in all seriousness by the old man who, outside his shop next the Hotel, spent his days smoking a large brass and glass narghileh, rather like Alice's caterpillar with his hookah! The same bland expression. We had great conversations and he often presented me with bunches of flowers—all mixed up such as a child might take to Teacher. Inside the shop, a d'oyley of the local lace hung beside a case of oranges—a bright splash of colour in that dark recess. An easel was covered with dirty fly-marked picture postcards dating back to tourist days. He called me "Sitt Major" and stood up and saluted every time I passed, whether or not I wanted to buy a donkey-bell or bit of pottery or a plate of sapphire Hebron glass. But we were friends, so he charged me only twice what everything was worth instead of three or four times!

The hotel was run by two Arab girls who had travelled extensively in Europe and spoke fluent English, German, Turkish and French and goodness knows what else beside their native tongue. They belonged to one of Palestine's powerful families, who were Christian Arabs. They helped me with Arabic and often took me visiting their friends.

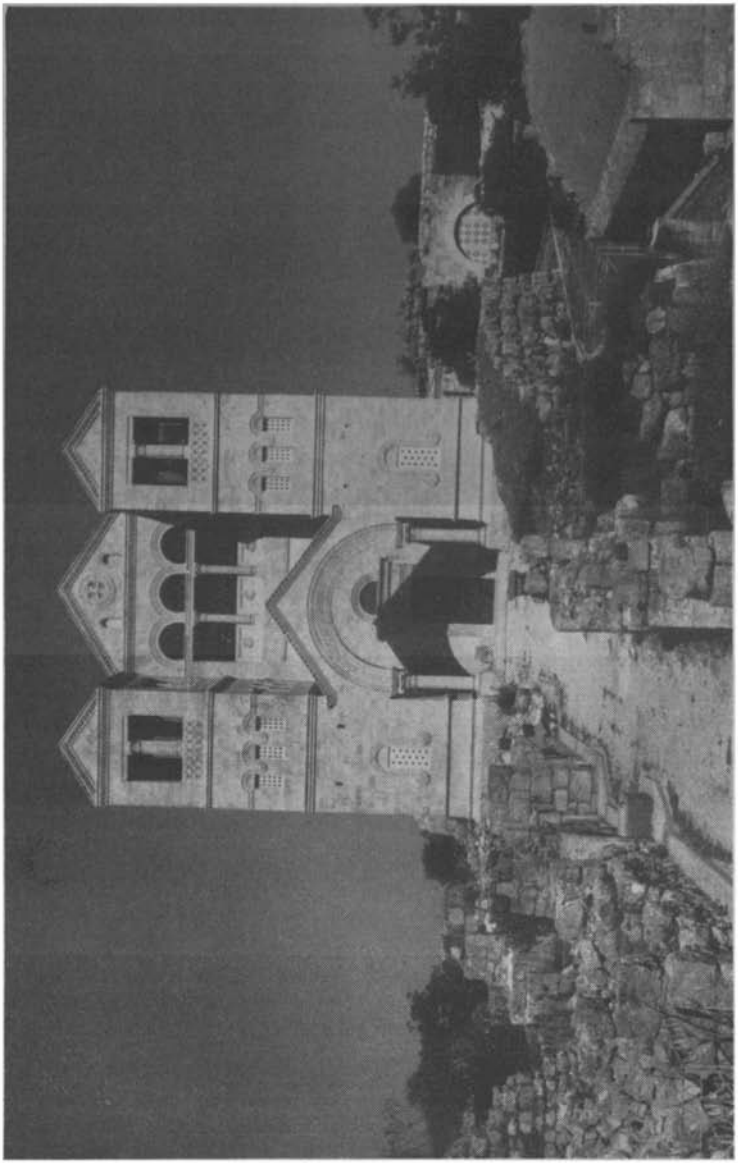
I learnt of the popularity of German "tourists," who had patronised the hotel before the war: the Arabs had found them generous . . . .

From a little balcony near my room I could look out over the high convent walls of the "Nuns who never speak" to the hills forming part of the basin in which Nazareth is situated. The Mountain of the Precipitation dropped sheer from its pointed summit to a wady below at an angle of only 20 degrees.

Surmounting the highest hill was a half-moon of upright dark cypresses like steeples, forming a background for a tiny French chapel. Surely no visitor to Palestine was ever more fortunate than I, privileged with the friendship of both our hospital padres! In that land of contrasts, an archdeacon's son, a holy monk, and a wild Australian woman spent many evenings on the little balcony sipping beer and discussing the old Bible stories. Theological differences were always good-humoured.



IN NAZARETH'S MAIN STREET.



THE CHURCH OF THE TRANSFIGURATION ON THE SUMMIT OF MOUNT TABOR.

"Nonsense, that's only in your Bible," would be countered with a soothing "Have some more beer, old boy!"

And below were enacted the street scenes in which our Saviour and His Mother had once taken part . . . . Could anyone be an atheist in Palestine? The hotel wood arrives per the inevitable donkey, a sackful on each side and as much as possible piled on his back. There is much rapid chatter between the woodman and the hotel porter while unloading proceeds. Led by a donkey with an Arab seated on the extreme end of his back comes a string of camels, roped in tandem. A little bell round the donkey's neck tingles in tune with the deeper notes of the larger camel bells. Loops of coloured beads hang beside the bells. In spite of the camels' superiority in size and self-esteem, it is the donkey who sets the pace. Suddenly he spots a piece of orange peel: the whole cavalcade halts while he picks it up. He resumes his way chewing. Donkeys, goats and "pi" dogs are the scavengers of the Middle East.

A camel so loaded with hay that he resembles a creeping haystack. Women carrying water from the Virgin's Well up the road. Classic pitchers adorn the heads of many—but in some cases the pitcher is replaced by a modern vessel—a petrol-tin! Another group comes round the bend in the winding road—the reverse side of the traditional picture of "The Flight into Egypt!" Here it is the man who is seated on the ass! A fine fellow, his legs almost touch the ground. Behind him trails his headdress like a cloud of glory, and he keeps the hot sun off himself with an umbrella. A perfect study in black and white. Behind him, pitcher on head and babe on arm, trudges his wife. She is veiled and her black hood is almost as long as her black gown which trails in the dust. She is wearing smart high-heeled shoes!

As in so much of the East to-day, contrast is present all the time. The sound of camel and donkey bells dies away and a loud hooting hits the eardrums as a motor bus shoots past, crammed with Arabs, their bicycles tied on the roof. Just down the street, soldiers and motor cycles cluster around a red and yellow

bowser. Shouts of happy Tommies come from the football ground.

Still another donkey passes, on his back a cane lounge, two chairs, a roll of bedding and a small table. He looks like a snail attempting to climb a lattice-work fence. An Arab trying to put himself and a large copper tray on his steed, which does not want to play, and sticks its four legs down hard. The Arab pulls the poor little beast into position by its tail, so violently that it seems it must come off!

Fascinating, happy days. No badly wounded patients just then to grieve over, only sick and injured who nearly always recovered. We worked at the hospital under palatial conditions, compared with what we were later to embark on in the Iraqian desert. Happy evenings, a hike with Padre Richard, a swim with Peter, his opposite number, or a shopping expedition to Haifa with both, always finishing up with beer and talk on the balcony before dinner. Shopping was great fun, our purchases ranging from a yard of elastic, for me to convert into garters for them, to the gramophone that was to mean so much to us later on.

I shall always remember a springtime walk I took one evening over the Galilean hills. The olive trees clustering into groves on the lower slopes. Passing from their shade, I climbed upwards to outcrops of limestone rocks, between which flourished tiny crops of green corn. Silhouetted on one cream rock against the green of the hillside stood a chestnut-coloured goat. I always think there is something so cheerful and up-and-doing about a goat! This one was no doubt wondering how he had become separated from the rest of his flock, but he did not appear at all worried about it.

On the wide flat rocks were shallow pools of rain-water, and crimson lichens clung to the creamy pink stone. All around were flowers—white and yellow daisies, rock roses like large pink flox, aniseed, anemones royal blue and scarlet, poppies, mauve and purple irises. Even tiny cyclamen perfectly formed, their white bells striped with pink. Among them grew

the "Crown of Thorns," a low spiky shrub with scarlet indented berries. Surely, I thought, Palestine must be the nursery of most of the cultivated flowers of the world! The effect was that of a living Persian carpet with colours intricately woven. All this burgeoning of growth rushed up and died within a few weeks. Soon it would be replaced by hot dry sand.

High on the mountain top, many hundreds of feet above sea level, I found tiny sea-shells. No, you sceptics, not snail shells. White and flattened, they resembled nautilus shells in miniature.

"And the waters prevailed exceedingly upon the earth; and all the high hills that were under the whole heaven, were covered . . . ."

Winded by the climb, I sat on a rock and looked out over the wide Plain of Esdraelon, over green fields broken by patches of chocolate soil where wooden ploughs had been at work. Esdraelon—the battlefield of Syria.

Here chariots mustered when the Canaanites under Sisera were routed by Barak, who was able to observe the battle from the beehive summit of Mount Tabor over there on my right. Heaven sent a torrential storm to aid the Israelites, and the whole of this plain became a treacherous swamp. Even General Sisera had to leave his chariot stuck in the mud and scramble off on foot, no doubt with his kaffiyeh flying in the breeze!

On this plain did Gideon wipe out the Midianites. Here Saul mustered his Israelites and made a midnight trip to consult with the Witch of Endor, in a cave down yonder. But the Philistines were victorious, and Saul and Jonathan were smitten down on heights towering within my very view. And down there fell Josiah, the last of Judah's great kings. Through those fields once rode the Shunammite lady on her way to Mount Carmel to beseech Elisha to restore her dead son.

Across in the opposite direction marched the last of the Crusaders under King Guy of Lusignan, to be annihilated by Saladin the Saracen over there on the Horns of Hattin. Below me Napoleon routed a huge

army of Turks, assembled to force him to raise the Siege of Acre, with the help of a flood such as that which had assisted King Barak. But up the coast at Acre (where we sometimes swam) Sir Sydney Smith had made him "miss his destiny," none the less. And in our time, during the "trouble" between Arab and Jew, much blood has been let in the villages hereabouts. Well may the Plain of Esdraelon show that rich chocolate soil!

Along a twisting gorge I gazed to a ridge of mountains at the end. They were dazzling and opalescent with a hazy shimmer in the sunset. Fluffy white clouds edged with the palest gold. Away on the horizon old Hermon lifted his snow-white head, and its summit was flaming red-gold.

No wonder, I thought, that Christ was so fond of climbing these mountains, when such glory rewarded the effort! And I could visualize the Little Mother escaping for an hour from household worries and scrambling up here to watch the sun set and gather flowers on just such a spring evening!

On the way down, I came upon an Arab shepherd leading a small mixed flock of about twenty sheep and goats. He stood in front of me, gabbling vigorously, rolling his eyes and waving his arms. When he had almost tied himself into knots, trying to make me understand, I gathered that he wished me to lead the flock to a boy squatting on a rock about half-way down. The shepherd was tired, or had business elsewhere, and I was obviously going down-hill. Why should he waste such an opportunity to have his work done for him?

Shades of my father and his stockwhip! How did one "lead" sheep? I patted the foremost sheep on the head, and cooed at him. He was a large skewbald animal, with the usual wide tail, and in good condition. Unlike Australian sheep in the late spring, he was unshorn. A real Christian Israelite of a sheep: I doubt if he had ever had a haircut! He hesitated, turned his dark eyes on me, while the rest of the flock waited obediently for his decision. He gave a little shake of his horned head, and one could almost hear him say,

"I don't understand it, but I suppose it's all right. Go ahead!"

I scrambled down the rocks with my flock pattering after me, feeling that my khaki uniform had somehow turned into a long white gown, and my forage cap into a billowing kaffiyeh. So like David, I "tended sheep upon the mountain side" until I reached the boy, who took over with a grin.

"Yesterday and to-day and the eternal to-morrows," I mused, "all merged into part of some stupendous plan." Yes, one feels that the plan is there, even if it is beyond the understanding of the limited amount of grey matter at present granted to men.

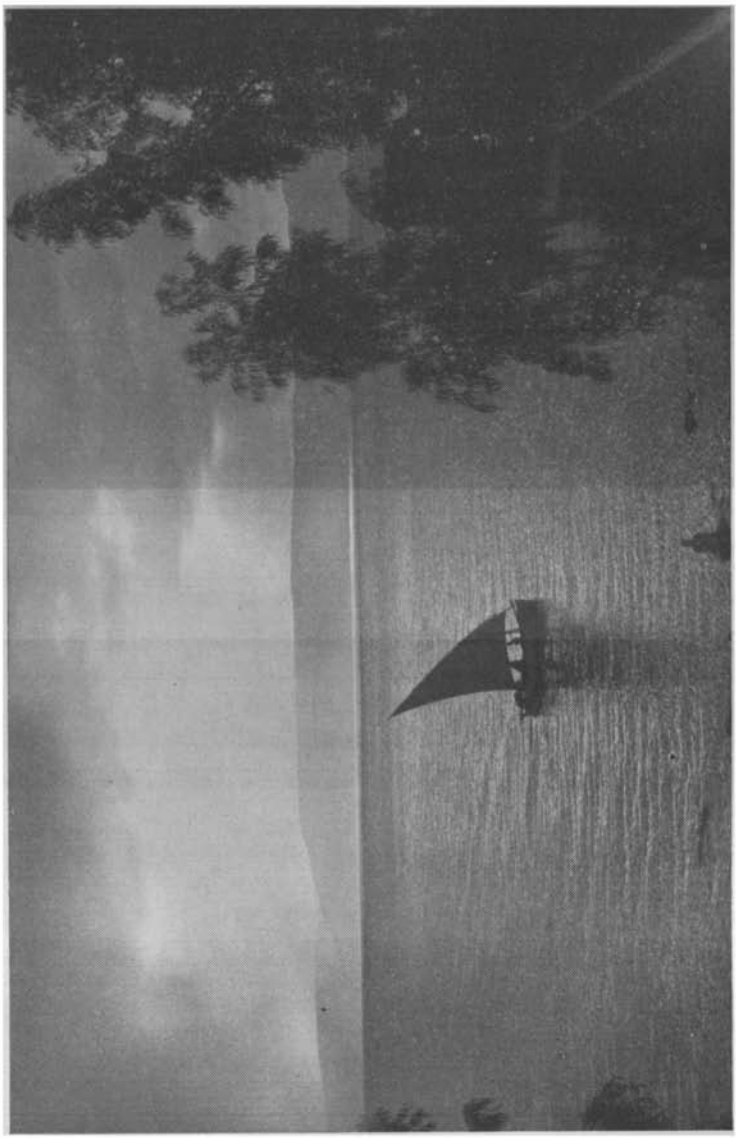
CHAPTER X

CONVOYS began to arrive from Tobruk. In the first were more than a hundred Australians, many of them fellow-travellers of mine from the United Kingdom. A big Queenslander who had been "O.C. Drunks" at Durban was carried in on a stretcher, wounded in the leg. The boys brought news of the death in action of the officer who had given me lessons in Arabic, and who had cherished a gum-leaf. Dear heroic William—when last seen he was firing off his revolver at two Germans armed with Tommy guns . . . .

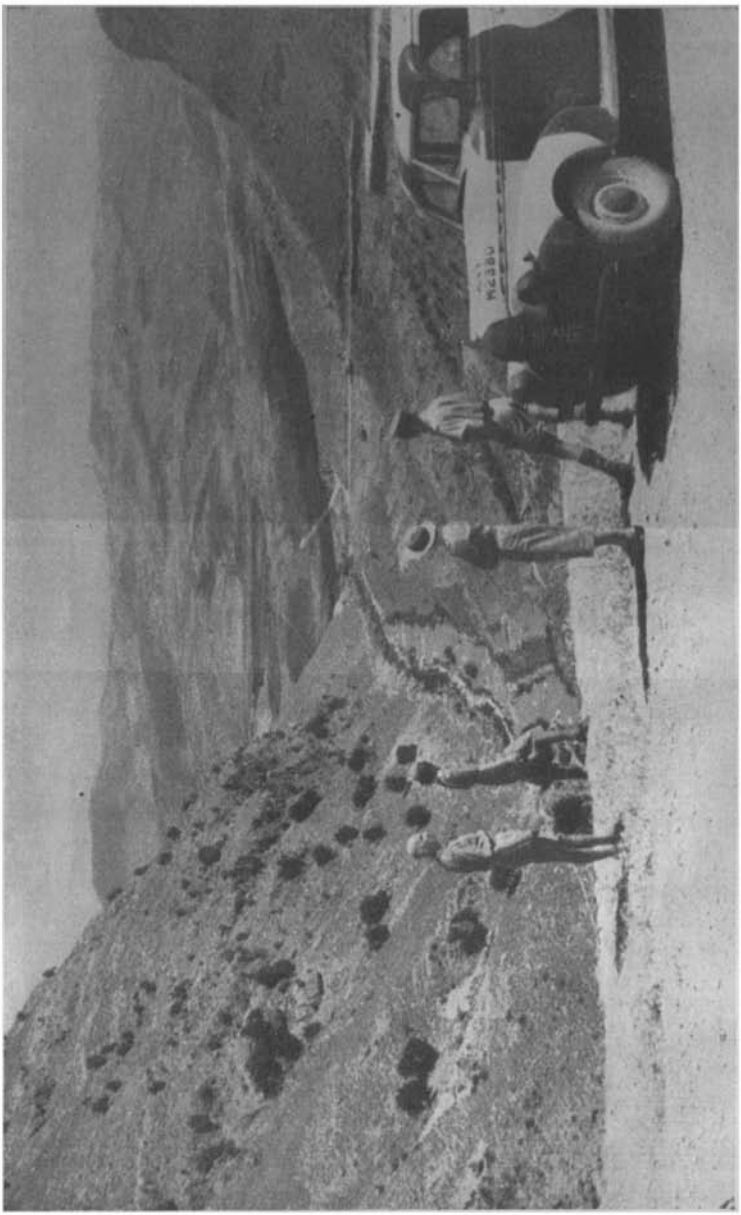
To some of them, poor pets, the formality of a British Hospital was a bit irksome, and I almost had to beat them over the head to keep them in bed, when they found there was an Aussie down in X-ray! We cleared the machinery out of one small room where they could smoke and play poker in comparative quiet. They helped me with my clerical work and ran messages. But for their own sakes, I was glad when they were transferred to an Australian hospital which was like a bit of home to them—and to me, too, when I managed to visit it!

. . . . . .

A charming French lady, her little daughter Michut, Peter the Padre and I were taken for an excursion up Mount Tabor by a kindly land officer. Up and up a winding bush track to the top of the Mountain of the Transfiguration. The view from the summit covered the terrain of much of the story of the past. Mount Hermon with its perpetual snows—the Jebel es Sheik, the Mountain of the Old Man. Venerable and hoary-headed indeed, its white beauty has inspired writers from Moses onwards. The Horns of Hattin, a bi-corned mountain peaceful enough now. The Mountains of Samaria, irregular, rugged, bare. The long range of Mount Carmel spreading to the sky. The Plateau of Bashan. Away down, hundreds of feet below the level of usual seas, nestled the Sea of Galilee. Blue and peaceful, it appeared to lie at the apex of an inverted cone formed by the mountains surrounding it. The



THE SEA OF GALILEE—AND AUSTRALIAN EUCALYPTS.



THE MOUNTAIN SIDES OF NORTHERN PALESTINE, BARE AND STARK.

northern shores were cut into by a chasm which marked the entrance of the River Jordan. We felt that we stood on the top of the world. On every foot of the disc of territory below us, there had happened something of significance in the history of man.

Alone on this wild mountain stood a monastery, right on the very highest point. Through the centuries there has always been a church or monastery on this sacred spot. The present Church, built by Americans, is modern and gleaming white. In its simplicity, it does not strike one as incongruous. Inside the Church were mosaics of minute fragments of glass, in tintings of gold, sapphire and jade, merging into peacock. Above the High Altar, the late sunlight shone on the radiant figure of the Transfigured Christ, glorious and triumphant. The very air of this spacious white Church breathed of light and hope . . . .

In strange proximity to the modern building, we walked over crumbling blocks of stone—remains of a twelfth century convent, we were told by one of the monks who led us to their formal garden, bright with red and golden roses. In the refectory, cool with its high white walls, we sat at the long polished table and drank the red wine brought by the monks. It was purple, smooth on the palate, and astonishingly potent. After the one glass I felt that the top of my head would come off! I could not find out whether the power lay in the grape or the recipe: certainly there was nothing Bacchanalian about the growth of the vines. Instead of clambering wildly up anything they could reach, like my grapevines at home, these Palestinian grapes grew on neat little bushes about two feet high.

Dusk crept on, blackening the mountains and the Sea of Galilee far below. Time for us to return homeward, but oh dear! the car would not start. No telephone reaches to this mountain top. If the monks are in trouble, they signal to the police in Nazareth by a method almost as old as their mountain. They light a beacon. In a cleared space rose a heap of scrub timber, newly gathered, because only the previous week they had been visited by a brigand who had decamped when the bonfire blazoned its message.

We turned the car round and rolled it down a little way. No responding splutter. It was all very creepy, and we felt that a miracle would be in order. The dark bushes, the age-old mountain, the bearded Franciscan holding up a lantern as mediaeval as himself, a brown-hooded Bedouin gate-crasher seated on a donkey, his beak and black whiskers showing sinister in the moonlight, a distant crackle, like shots, as cattle trod over twigs.

One wondered what the donkey thought of the car. Possibly what a human being would feel on being faced with a robot. At last we got the petrol through the carburettor, and the monks were loud in their praise of Australian resourcefulness. This, I reflected, was no doubt due to the fact that most of the ladies of their acquaintance exercised their wits about the problematical troubles of the next world rather than the practical ones of this!

On the outskirts of Nazareth, we met the police armoured car on its way up to look for us, as we had been reported "missing." It bristled with guns, and I should just hate to be the person who starts any fun and games with the Palestinian Police. And when I reached the hotel, there was the Colonel of Police, a great friend of mine, solicitously waiting up for me in his dressing gown. He reminded me exactly of my own mother, who never would go to bed until we were all home from a dance!

. . . . . .

The Director of Medical Services arrived one afternoon to inspect the Hospital, and we had a great corroboree. All officers paraded for inspection too. We glittered with spit and polish—I even wore gloves to hide the hypo. stains on my hands.

The inspection over, "I trust," said the Officer Commanding the Surgical Division—a man I admired tremendously—"That you will be in the X-ray Department for an hour, in case the General should wish to see it."

"I'll be there," I replied gaily, "Probably on my knees by a bucket of water, this being our cleaning day. Perhaps that will make Cairo realise that the

staff laid down for a peace-time hospital is not adequate in wartime with convoys arriving!"

The Colonel's eyes popped with horror. "For God's sake, Major—I beg you not to do anything of the sort. I know you are quite equal to it!" So I promised not to, but a girl must have her fun!

I had quite a lot of fun with our Commanding Officer, a "regular" soldier since taking his degree. He was reputed to have greeted the news of my arrival with the remark that he didn't see why he should be landed with the only woman officer on active service, and an unruly Australian at that! However, we soon became good friends, and he was kind to me off duty. A great stickler for correctness was he, but no one had sent him a bit of paper about the official headgear for a woman officer, and I was able to sport the Digger hat presented to me on the troopship by the commander of one of the battalions that went to Greece.

Still, good friends as we were, the "Old Man" and I did not have quite the same sense of proportion, nor did he appreciate my well-meant attempts to reorganise the British Army along good housekeeping lines. He laboured under the rigid conviction that no Australian had any discipline in him at all. Speaking not for other Australians, but for myself alone, I conceded that discipline was very necessary as a means to an end—efficiency, but that I could see no sense in putting discipline before efficiency, or, in a medical unit, before charity. Daily did my veneration for Miss Nightingale increase, as I realised what she must have been up against. It is so hopeless to argue common sense against tradition. But then I would remember what tradition had done for the English so lately—they had won the "war of nerves" by ignoring the blitz and refusing to be pushed off their beaten track.

Homesickness, I fear, will always be my trouble. To the city dweller, one part of the world is nearly as good as another, because cities anywhere have so much in common. But to one whose parents and grandparents all grew up in the Australian bush, there can be no substitute for home, because no other country even vaguely resembles home. Parts of New

Zealand resemble parts of England, Scotland, and Switzerland. Even the bare Galilean and Judean hills with their rocky outcrops are something like parts of Ireland. But nowhere except in Australia does one see a burnt brown paddock cleared among miles of grey-green eucalyptus, whose giant trunks, some hundreds of feet high, shed their bark to add to the carpet of undergrowth. Nowhere else do our animals flourish in their wild state—the kangaroo with joey in pouch, the night-loving koala bear and 'possum, the platypus and porcupine which lay eggs and yet suckle their young. And the scent of the bush is like no other scent on earth.

But it was impossible to be absolutely homesick in Palestine, for there was quite a lot of my native flora and fauna about. The flora consisted of eucalyptus, which, they say, will grow. whereover olives grow, scrub wattle, lantana and the Queensland silky oak—all very neat and regimented.

The fauna arrived sightseeing in great force on Anzac Day, 25th April, which commemorates the landing of the first Australian and New Zealand Army Corps at Gallipoli. Three of them were walking arm-in-arm down the main street, very uplifted, one having exchanged his felt hat for a scarlet fez. I thought that funny, and took a snap—which did not come out! —but back at the hotel the sound of lamentations hit my ear as soon as I opened the door. There was much rolling of eyes and waving of arms among the staff.

"Zose terrible Australians have been here, and zey have taken away ze tarbush of Moussa."

And old Moussa, the Gyppo. waiter, glowered like an avenging angel in his white gown, a white fringe haloing his bald black head. Oh well, for the honour of my country—

"How much falouse, Moussa?"

The opportunist in Moussa overcame the angel.

"Half-pound, Madame, ashkarik."

One of the many peculiarities of that frightful language is that if you are saying "thank you" to a man you say "ash-karak"; if to a woman, "ash-karik." But that was an expensive snapshot, especially as I

expect the Digger had already tipped the old wretch well!

With a dear big colleague from my own city (whom I had last seen on one of Melbourne's beaches) I drove from Nazareth to Lake Tiberias, the Sea of Galilee, over ground where Christ had passed. The taxi rattled past the Well of Cana in Galilee, where camels, donkeys, sheep and goats quenched their thirst, and black robed women filled their pitchers with clear spring water. Dozens of children laughed and chattered. To the side of a green hill clung one of the holiest Jewish places in Palestine—the village Safed. The window-sills of its houses were all painted blue, a precaution made compulsory for Jewish householders during the "trouble," so that the police could distinguish easily the dwellings of Arab and Jew.

We passed the wreck of an Arab village, ruined by an earthquake many years ago, and the Horns of Hattin. We tore around mountain sides bare and stark, stripped of their timber by the Turks. The Sea of Galilee came into view far below us—forget-me-not-blue. As we descended the mountain we made out the sandy shores, interrupted by the city of Tiberius and in the distance by a clump of tall cypresses which indicated Capernaum.

The road wound down the last hill, and we entered Tiberius, the White City of Agrippa, and an ancient seat of Rabbinical learning after the fall of Jerusalem. Just inside the town was the round keep of an old Crusader castle rearing its solid bluestone head above the flat-roofed modern dwellings. Here we found sulphur springs, and a modern Lido!

On we drove around the shores of the lake, and over the Syrian border. Here our identity cards were checked by a member of the Transjordanian Police, "tall, dark, and handsome" wearing a brown tunic and trousers and a huge fez of khaki-coloured astrakhan as well as several guns.

On past Magdala, the village where lived that sinner Mary who had anointed the feet of Christ with ointment from an alabaster jar. Looking at the hot sand, one thought how soothing that ointment would have

been, for Jesus covered great distances on foot, through the blazing summer heat which replaces Palestine's green spring. In so many of the great paintings, He is represented with a weak, almost effeminate face. One must actually walk through His country to realise how physically strong He must have been to endure the hardships of travel!

On we went to Capernaum, at the foot of the Mount of the Beatitudes, through a plantation of eucalyptus trees and clumps of pink oleander bushes flowering right to the water's edge. From a landing stage we looked out across the calm blue lake to the height down which had rushed the Gadarene swine. Certainly there would be no stopping anything once started down that precipitous slope!

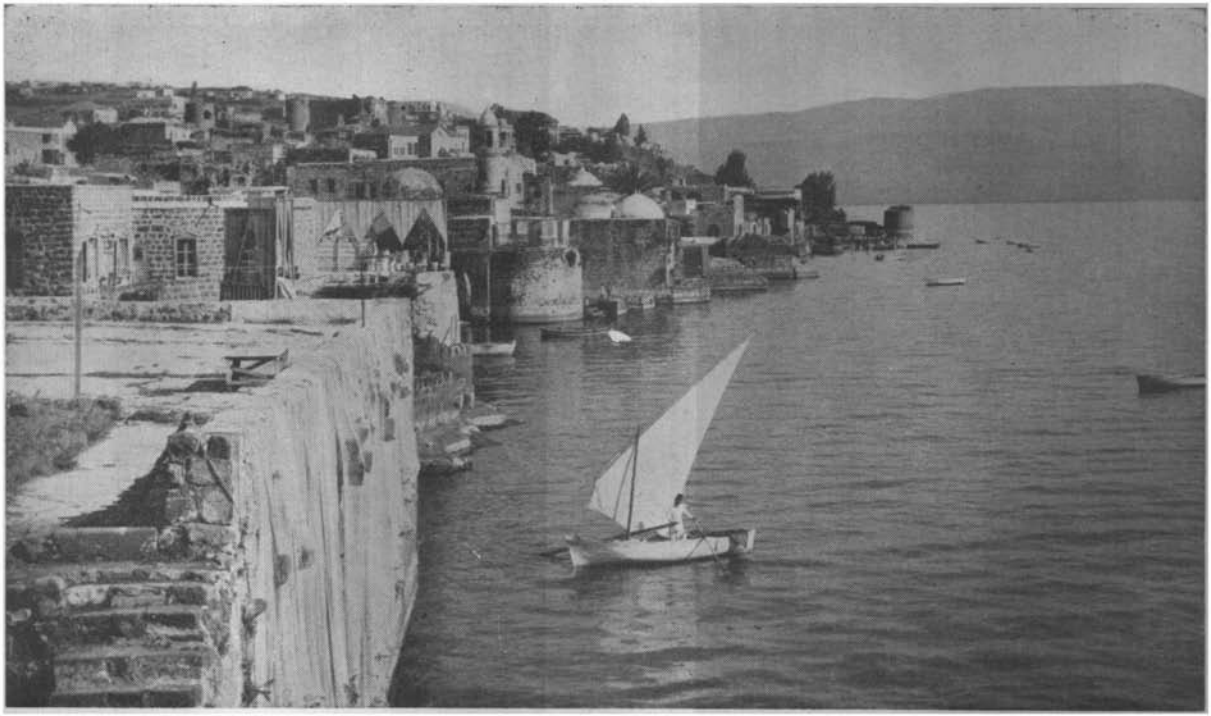
Patches of silver shone just below the surface of the water—shoals of fish. "St. Peter's fish" they are called locally. Little fishing boats flaunted their white sails before us, and Arabs dragged in a net just as the Apostles had done.

In the hall of the monastery at Capernaum hangs a steel engraving depicting the stormy Tempest: the Portuguese brother assured me that often he had seen waves as high on the now still sea. A picturesque old monk, with black robe and beard and wide sombrero hat. Led by him, we picked our way among the ruins of the Synagogue—heaps of big square stones jumbled before the remains of a building, some of whose pillars were still standing.

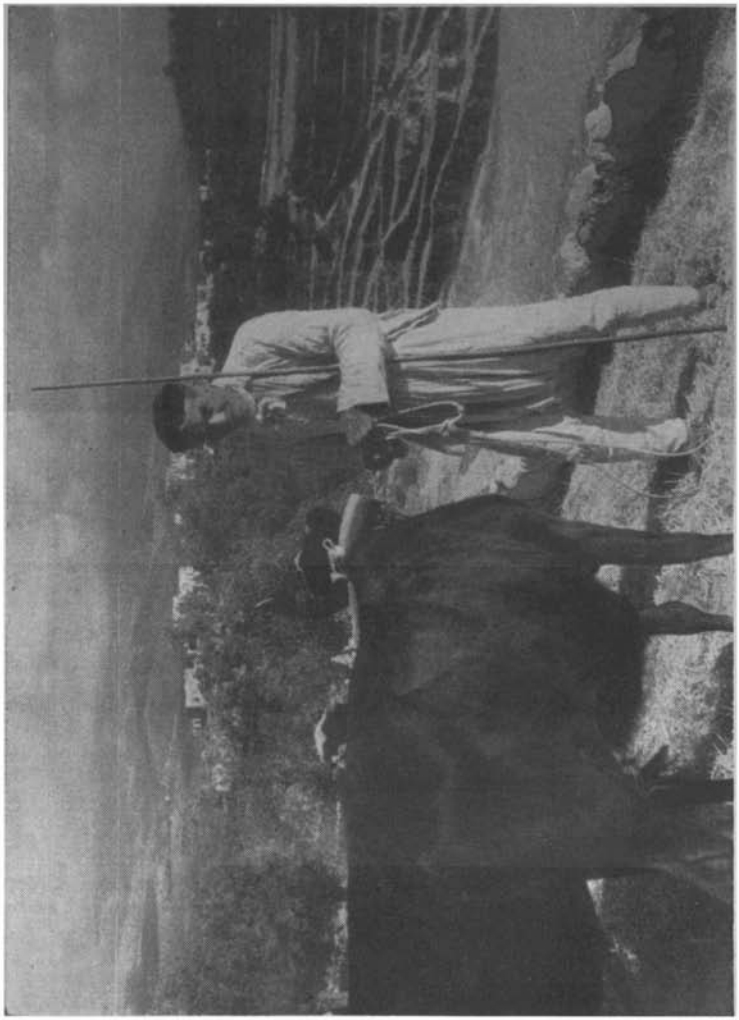
"And they went into Capernaum, and straight-
way on the Sabbath day
He entered into the synagogue, and taught."

And here, we were told, was what remained of that very synagogue. Certainly on many of the stones, Hebraic characters showed clearly. In a field nearby St. Peter's house was said to have stood.

And we swam in the Sea of Galilee! Back in Tiberias at the modern Lido . . . .



TIBERIAS, THE "WHITE CITY OF AGRIPPA," ON THE SEA OF GALILEE.



PART OF A THRESHING FLOOR, AND A TERRACED OLIVE GROVE.

CHAPTER XI

NEWS came that British troops had passed into Iraq. From Arabs resident in the Hotel I heard that Hitler was boasting he would be in that country in twelve days, and that families were being evacuated from Baghdad.

To see an Indian tailor about some summer uniforms, I went off shopping to Haifa in an Arab bus. We proceeded in an uproar of chatter and gesticulation. The driver frequently had both hands off the wheel, flapping them overhead. Along the road the bus was accosted by a Bedouin in a long brown cloak, waving his arms in the middle of the road. The driver could not run over him, so stopped. Then followed a conversation of many words, the name of Allah cropping up a good deal. Eventually the O.C. Bus picked up the hitch-hiker, making him sit on the back seat. Obviously he did not "Protex himself daily."

On the return journey I acquired a "seat in a taxi," which meant paying piastres to the value of 2/6 and waiting till the car filled up. This it did gradually, with Arabs in all variety of costume. A veiled woman, with a laughing sticky baby, contributed not one word to the conversation, which as usual was animated.

We tore round the bends through the hills between Haifa and Nazareth. I never could reconcile the song about "The Arab's Farewell to his Favourite Steed" with the way the Arabs of my acquaintance treated their steeds, let alone their cars! To them a car was a thing to put into top gear and send headlong at maximum speed, irrespective of what might be around the next bend.

Coming home from Jerusalem one night, through the mountains of Samaria, it terrified me to look over the precipices that were rushing past.

"Surely, George, it is dangerous to drive like this," I protested, jamming down my feet and gripping hard on the seat.

"Yes, Madame," agreed George blandly. "It is dangerous, but Allah is good!"

In the back seat of the taxi sat an old chap in a kaffiyeh, held in position by the black wool rope or ageyl. Fierce black moustaches did he have, a hawk beak and brown humorous eyes with wrinkles at the side. He started on a tale and the driver translated it to me as we went along. It seems he had back-chatted a Palestinian policeman, and was handed out a ten pound fine and a month in jail. The Arabs hate being shut up. He offered to pay fifteen pounds and not do the month, but the Judge took an opaque view of that, and the old fellow was now very hostile about "British justice."

A man wearing a well-cut European suit and a beret, shouted that once it had been their country, but now it really belonged to the English, who had landed them with the Jews! I suggested that they had not had too good a time under the Turks, anyhow, and they had to agree, but went on yabbering and did not translate any more. I frequently caught the words Iraq and "falouse" (money), but thought no more of it until two or three days later, when the wives of the Iraq Petroleum Company's officials were flown over to Nazareth on their way further south, bringing the news that revolt had broken out near the oil wells at Kirkuk. And soon came convoys of wounded Tommies.

The hotel Arabs informed me that our hospital was moving to Basrah. It had been a peace-time establishment in Northern Palestine for years, and jeers were loud from those concerned when I passed on the rumour. But this piece of "bush telegraphy" eventually proved correct.

As the evenings drew longer, I went riding with one Hassan Selim, a tall agile youth with the looks of a Hollywood star, who assured me that he would look after me as though I were his mother. I was quite touched by his solicitude, until one day I heard that he had just been released from gaol, after doing a stretch for the attempted murder of his father, and began to have doubts about his idea of devotion to his parents. A resourceful youth was "The Major's pet wog," as Sarge and Joe called him. One evening out on the hills, a sister wanted a match for her cigarette. Hassan rolled his eyes heavenward, and in their

peregrinations they lighted on a compatriot ploughing up a patch on the next mountain, with donkey, plough and Arab in flowing robes making a perfect cameo against the hillside. Like a mountain goat Hassan bounded across the intervening wady, and was soon waving his arms before the driver of the plough. Back he ran in a few minutes, sheltering a burning wick made from a strip of the ploughman's kaffiyeh! Sister enjoyed her cigarette!

Ali, the paper boy, delivered the "Palestine Illustrated News" daily. It seemed so incongruous, in this land of tradition and ancient tales, to read in "Social and Personal"—

"Mahommed Pasha al Onsi, Court Chamberlain to His Highness the Amir Abdullah, has now returned to his duties after a short holiday."

Probably driving in a Rolls after staying at a fashionable hotel! East and West have met indeed.

The paper also quoted an ingenious amateur soothsayer of Baghdad, who foretold the doom of Hitler and Mussolini in 1941. His sum went—

Hitler was born	1889
Hitler's age to-day is	52
The number of years he has been in power is	8
The year in which he came into power was	1933
Total	3882

Now there are two Dictators in the world, Hitler and Mussolini. And to discover the date of their doom, divide 3882 by 2. And the answer is this year of grace .... 1941. Unfortunately, there must have been a mistake somewhere.

Great was the excitement when an Australian Casualty Clearing Station arrived to take over from our hospital at Nazareth. Our marching orders had come through—we were to reopen somewhere else, but until our destination was announced we were to be accommodated in a transit camp in Southern Palestine. The Arabs stuck to their tale about Basrah ....

There was great bustle and movement as we evacuated our patients and backed up: the C.C.S., whose officers had nearly all been fellow-students of

mine, moved in room by room. "Not there, you silly cow," was music in my ears, as some Digger parked something in the wrong place. I wondered how the dignitaries at the War Office would have reacted could they have seen their "Screens, glass for stereoscopic stand, 2" nestling among my winter woollies.

The hotel was full of rumours. Though things seemed to be quietening in Iraq, there was talk of doings in Syria. Some of our A.I.F. boys, back from Greece, were visiting Nazareth on leave, all anxious for more fight.

At length came the day when the last patient was gone, the last lorry loaded and off, and the officers of our unit piled into a bus and left behind the fascination of Nazareth and the comfort of work in a cool stone building. When we reopened, it would be in a desert waste in one of the world's hottest spots, working and living in tents, over, under, and through which blew sandstorms at the rate of three or four a week.

However, we didn't know that, and a holiday spirit pervaded that bus as it tore round the Galilean mountains and south through Samaria. Through Jenin, where the mountains of Samaria meet the Plains of Esdraelon. Past the sycamores and squat stone houses of Nablus, where there had been much slaughter during the "troubles." Nablus—the Arabic corruption of Neapolis, that new city rebuilt by Titus Vespasian on the ruins of Shechem. Here Abraham made his first camp after he crossed the Jordan into "the Land of Canaan." Here he built the first altar to Jehovah in the Promised Land.

"And the Lord appeared unto Abram, and said, Unto thy seed will I give this land: and there builded he an altar unto the Lord." Just here, near the bus route!

And Jewish tradition has it that when they reached the Promised Land from Egypt, the Israelites buried at Shechem the bones of Joseph. "For from Shechem Joseph had once been stolen, and unto Shechem he was returned."

On went the bus, past a well where once a beautiful maiden named Rachel had filled her pitcher, and kept appointments for seven long years with her lover Jacob.

The mountains of Samaria left behind, we crossed miles and miles of red sand, and entered an irrigation area, with citrus groves, so restful to the eyes after the glare of sun on sand. Nazareth had been an Arab village, and the only cultivated flowers grew in monasteries and convents. The Arab gardens behind their high walls were bright with flowers growing wild among grass and stones. But in this Jewish area, carefully tended gardens surrounded white concrete houses, which formed a brilliant background for bougainvillea and blue convolvulus. Creepers covered banks, and lizards wriggled over concrete paths. Every here and there a eucalyptus "copse."

Here in Southern Palestine was the camp where our hospital unit was to await embarkation. Parked in a tent "to myself," I found the Sisters' Mess quite comfortable, but as hot as anything I had up to then experienced, and the restrictions thought necessary by Authority to preserve the virtue of the sisters would soon have palled on a middle-aged mother. So I was inclined to look with favour on Padre Richard when he presented himself at my tent-flap next morning, followed by a batman, a small boy, and a camel.

"I have found billets for you and me in the village, Mary," he announced, well pleased with himself. "Here," indicating the bored-looking animal—"is transport for your luggage."

"Billets for you and me in the village," I repeated. "But Richard, I'm a respectable woman. Think of the scandal!"

Padre Richard turned on me a look such as Mrs. Caesar might have reserved for a presumptuous slave.

"Reallay," he exclaimed in his best Oxford. "A respectable woman! How often has the Army found it necessary to impress upon you that you are not a woman at all, only an officer! And without wishing to give offence, I might mention that you are almost, if not quite, old enough to be my mother . . . . And have you ever seen yourself in that khaki dress? But go and see the Colonel, and if he has no objection. I don't see why anybody else should have."

Now if I have inherited anything from my pioneering great-grandmothers, it is an ardent desire for

comfort when comfort can be had. I thought of the scorpion that had chased his tail round my tent-pole in the small hours, of the jackals howling in the orange grove uncomfortably close by, and of the camp-bed, designed for a boy scout, not a woman built on what might charitably be termed generous lines. I sought out the Colonel. He had no objection. He was "living out" himself!

So my kit, except the precious typewriter, was loaded on to that camel, and arrived at the billets with no greater casualty than a cracked powder compact. The house, whitewashed concrete with roof of red and floors of white tiles, stood between the sandy road and the edge of a great citrus plantation. It was occupied by a young Roumanian-Jewish family, consisting of Madame, Monsieur—an ex-undergraduate who toiled from daylight till dark in the groves—and Offra, aged two, a beautiful golden child with blue eyes and a will of her own.

Under the house lived "le chien," with no less than seven petits chiens, which yapped most of the night, and "le chevre," a large white goat brought from Roumania. Madame, a smart young brunette with ribbons in her hair, had no English, but spoke good French. At least I thought it good—Richard could never comprehend how it came about that Madame understood my "Australian" French so much better than his Parisian. Of course, the fact that we do have Parisian teachers in that Antipodean spot, Melbourne, surprised him exceedingly.

"Madame spoke quite reasonable French when we came here," he mourned. "But now, after a week of Australian French, the wretched creature talks about an 'oof."

We had great fun over those same "'oofs." Madame turned a pretty omelette, but Richard, one of those men never at his best in the morning, insisted on having his breakfast eggs boiled, a new departure for her. Indeed, one morning she made no less than three attempts to boil them to his satisfaction. After struggling with the mucoussy mess, Richard said grace with a certain amount of irony.

Madame countered all criticism by asking for his rent, annoying him still more, since he was determined that she should wait till his allowances came in at the end of the month. He turned to me in the middle of an argument, saying in English, "Look here, shall we murdah this infernal idiot?" I was helpless with giggles: Madame and Offra were laughing uproariously, though naturally they did not know why.

Little Offra delighted in our gramophone, and used to dance into the sitting room, shrieking for "musica." "Oh dear," groaned Richard one day. " I gave that wretched woman a piece of string. A nice clean piece. All she had to do was to tie a knot under little Offra's left ear and pull the loop tight. Instead, what does she do? Uses it to tie up the kid's pants!" None the less, I noticed that little Offra's face was often sticky from sweets brought to her by the Padre.

The Tommies adored Richard, and every evening he brought two or three to the digs for a sing song, yarn, and cup of tea. He was just like a big brother to the men of the unit, always kind, always cheerful, and genuinely interested in all their troubles and joys. He had a terrific correspondence from men he had worked among since Dunkirk, now up the desert or in Syria, and I have never known anyone work harder. The simple Christianity he taught helped many a one over a tough spot.

The Syrian campaign went on. Casualties were brought in to a neigbouring hospital, but we were "on 24 hours' notice" and not working. One ward nearby was reserved for French soldiers, the only qualification for admittance being that the patient should be French, so Free French and Vichy prisoners lay side by side. The orderlies were hard put to it at first to keep them from leaping out of bed and attacking one another, and those whose bodies were unequal to the strain fought hard with their tongues. However, it all ended by most of the Vichy French being converted and wishing to become Free French. One day, this hospital was visited by General de Gaulle, a man of tremendous personality.

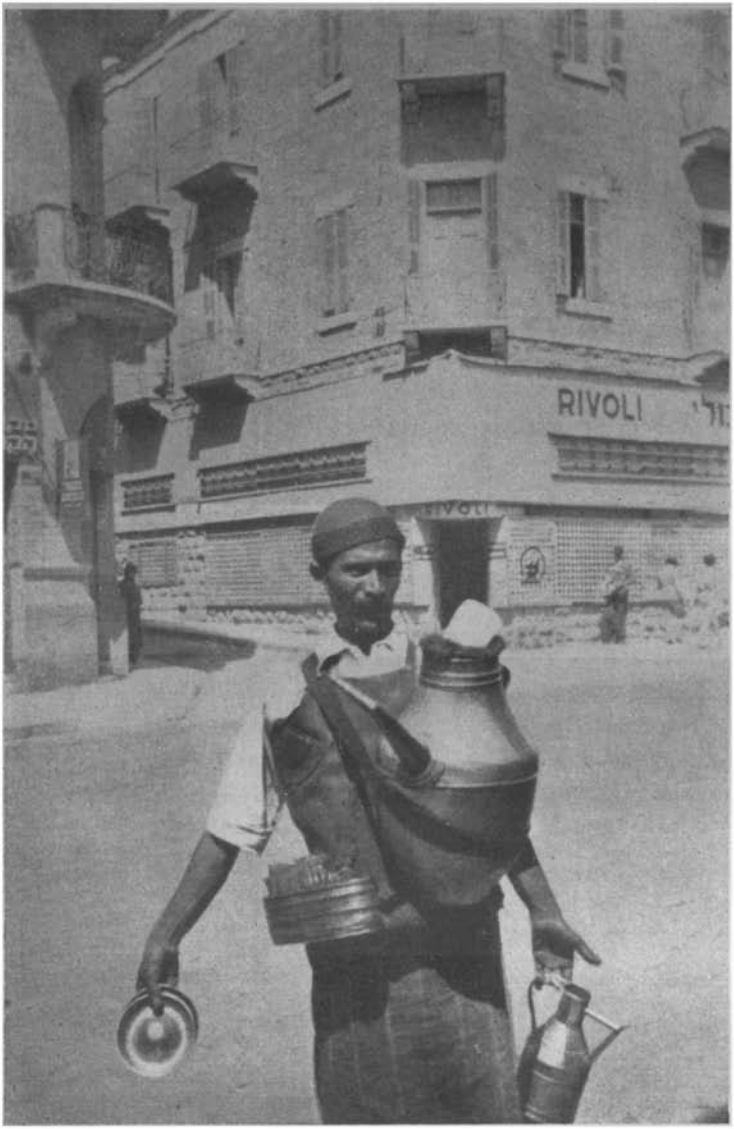
Days passed into weeks. We were in a Jewish area

now, and heard no more rumours of Basrah as our destination. The latest furphy was the Canal area. Apart from feeling that we would like to be working, (but "orders is orders" and we could do nothing about that), we all enjoyed the holiday immensely. Both Jerusalem and Tel Aviv were within bounds. Peter the Padre had been provided with a Baby Austin, as he was working hard throughout the day visiting Italian prison camps out in the country, and I managed to be taken along on most of his expeditions.

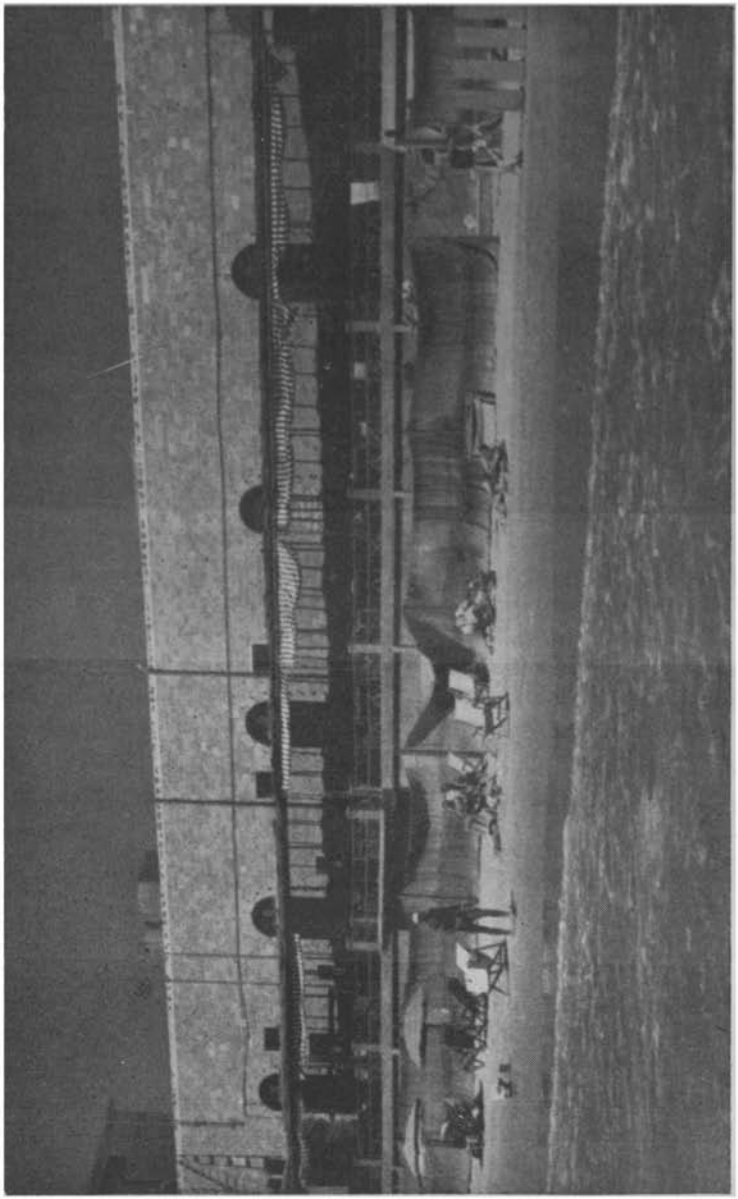
From the Jaffa-Jerusalem road on the side of one of the Judean mountains, we gazed down over terraces of ancient olive trees to the valley below, where threshing was in progress. The machinery was simple. A large raft, attached behind a team of ox and ass, two asses, or even a pony and an ox, was dragged in a wide circle over the corn spread on the threshing floor, each team led by a small boy. The winnowed corn was tossed in the air by women armed with forks and the wind blew away the husks, so that all remained for the workers to do was to fill their wicker baskets with clean grain. The corn was brought to the threshing floor by camels, roped in tandem and led by the inevitable donkey. We drove past a cavalcade which looked like a series of moving haystacks, so completely did the stooks conceal the camels.

Labour problems among the Arabs are simple. A farmer pays four piastres a day (about 10d.) to women working in the field. If times are bad and he cannot meet his wages bill, he marries a few of his staff, and then they have the honour of toiling for him for nothing!

The Jews, of course, use modern machinery and modern methods of cultivation and fertilization, and the difference in yield from similar pieces of ground is, I believe, colossal. Experimental farms where research proceeds constantly; the scientific working of the irrigated citrus groves and vineyards; the establishment of chemical works to extract salts from the Dead Sea; model training farms for girls, as well as boys, to prepare settlers for life on the land; are only some of the achievements of Zionism. Cessation of export on account of the war was a tremendous blow



A LEMONADE SELLER OF JAFFA.



THE JAFFA CLUB WAS A GREAT SPOT FOR OFFICERS ON LEAVE.

to the citrus industry. Oranges and grape fruit lay rotting on the ground, but experiments were in progress with a view to converting the succulent Jaffa orange into a small dry tablet, easily transportable.

Malarial swamps had been drained with eucalyptus, modern cities had been erected on the sites of decaying villages, and educational and social services appeared to be working well. But, to my selfish mind, the super achievement of the Zionist Movement is the creation of the Palestine Orchestra. Over two hundred of the world's finest musicians, reclaimed from the hells of Central Europe, interpret the agonies and the joys of their race in burning floods of vibration.

A bird of passage obviously cannot presume to offer opinions as to the rights and wrongs of the tremendous Arab-Jew problem. But it has all been worked out in "Orientations," by Sir Ronald Storrs, the first Christian Governor of Jerusalem since Crusading times. Speaking of his desire to write dispassionately, in "Zionism and Palestine," he says—"I may be risking thereby the toleration of my Jewish, the confidence of my Arab, the respect of my Christian friends." Which should indicate impartiality.

I loved Sir Ronald's concluding quotation of a Moslem prayed uttered in Basrah a thousand years ago, called to his mind by a study of Homer, Dante, Shakespeare and the Bible, Bach and the Flanders Primitives—

"Oh, my Lord! If I worship Thee from fear of Hell, burn me in Hell; and if I worship Thee from hope of Paradise, exclude me thence; but if I worship Thee for Thine own sake, then withhold not from me Thine Eternal Beauty."

One has to live at a place like Basrah—if the globe holds such another—to understand that craving for Beauty. It affects different people in different ways. To some, it can be submerged in whisky. To others, it is satisfied by a snappy hair-do and make-up. And to others still, by a search through the hot bazaar for a tin of needles, so that the old gramo. can release the spirit-voices of Bach and Beethoven when one has driven "home" across twenty miles of burning desert.

CHAPTER XII

SHOPPING in Tel Aviv one day with some of the Sisters, I encountered Patrick and Ned, two of the young officers who had shared my rug on that horrible last train journey in U.K. We lunched on the porch of a café above the Blue Mediterranean, which is the Reckitt's Blue of Sydney Harbour and Port Phillip Bay. White tiled floor to the porch, marble topped tables with green iron legs, shady orange and red umbrellas. Good food and a jazz band.

Then we took a taxi for Jaffa. Once across the road dividing that city from Tel Aviv, we found vehicular traffic stopped, so got out and walked. Taxis always did seem all wrong in Moslem Jaffa, but all right in Jewish Tel Aviv. In Jaffa I much preferred the garry, or open carriage with shiny brass lamps and two horses. And fleas!

To-day there was great excitement in the streets, for the Lord Mayor of Jaffa was being buried. The Jaffa Boy Scouts headed the cortege, waving a huge banner. A large yellow bus became a hearse, and through the windows one saw the coffin—green, because the Lord Mayor had made the pilgrimage to Mecca; and along the footpaths, keeping pace with the bus, ran the male population, many carrying wreaths, while from balconies the veiled women looked down. Women and animals miss most of the fun in the East.

The Jaffa Club was a great spot for officers on leave, and offered all the conveniences of the modern military clubs so common throughout the East—home papers, billiard tables, dressing rooms, café tables on a verandah above the beach. Deck chairs and beach umbrellas brightened the terrace, and round the whole enclosure ran a fence of plaited reeds. I must have had a big lunch that day, because I could make no headway against the surf when swimming in from a raft. Ned gave me his hand just as I was beginning to grow wild-eyed and floppy, more than compensating for the discomfort he had caused me in the train by falling asleep with his head on my shoulder!

Up on the headland, the Arab funeral progressed with much enthusiasm and vim. Ned and Patrick went off to a dance with the Sisters, leaving me sprawled on the sand waiting for Peter the Padre, who was coming in for the Palestine Orchestral Concert at the end of his day's work. All my Aussie friends at Nazareth approved very highly of Peter, he was such a good sport and easily the best English swimmer in Palestine. They urged him to come to Australia after the war, and in the meantime, they charged him with the job of looking after me, which he did nobly and uncomplainingly right up to the day of my transfer from the unit.

The surf broke lustily on the reef in front of me. The very rocks, it was said, where Andromeda had been chained and rescued by Perseus. Drowsily I recollected the legend.

Australian voices recalled me to June, 1941. Here in a swimsuit was a friend of my husband's, commanding an Australian General Hospital just established near the orange groves, and with him four fellow-students of mine and some nursing Sisters, including a young cousin. Home news hot off the press! The Aussies never understood how I nearly fell on their necks with delight on these chance encounters; they all worked together as an Australian unit, I was a poor lone wolf. Never a lost sheep among wolves, the British were consistently kind to me and I had some real friends among them. But in our Corps, officers were constantly being changed from one unit to another, and with an Englishman, the transition period of a courteous acquaintance into a "dinkum cobber" is a long one. However, all my unit now said "good-morning" to me before I said it to them, so I was progressing! But of all the things I enjoyed about Palestine, I loved best these chance meetings with old friends.

Peter arrived, we had a glorious swim, the surf having tamed down a bit, and then set off to hear the Orchestra. To a hall packed with soldiers of all ranks, and a large sprinkling of Tel Aviv civilians, the musicians played Dvorak's Fifth Symphony, the "New

World," based on America's folk-lore. It was simply unforgettable.

Home at the digs, little Offra was bellowing dismally. " 'Blessed is he who casteth his children upon a rock' " groaned Padre Richard. "Now when I encounter that verse, I shall simply say 'But of course!' Hitherto I have tried to explain it away!"

Offra's yells were soon traced to a common childish complaint.

"If one of you will go up to the hospital for this medicine for the kid, she'll soon be out of pain," said I.

Richard was away and back before we got the tea made.

. . . . . .

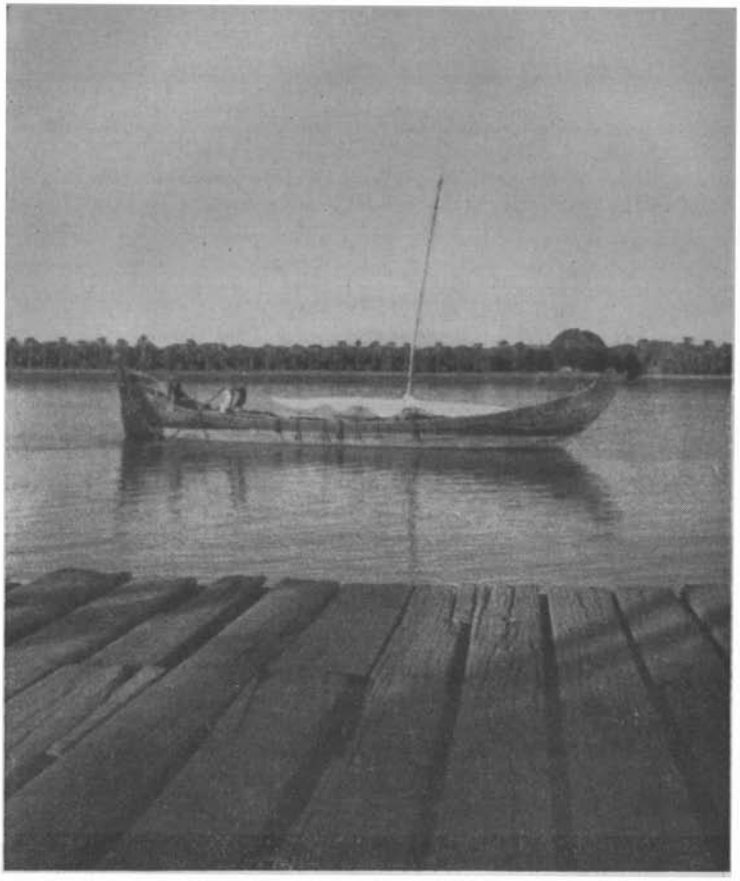
Our boys, with the Tommies, were still holding Tobruk. Letters came frequently, perfectly cheerful. "The swimming at this resort is good."—imagine swimming in those blitz-shaken waters! "No beer for a month, our kidneys are getting a good rest." "We have a gramophone, and our repertoire ranges from 'The Moonlight' to 'She had to go and lose it at the Astor!' " "Anyone who wants a decoration can go out and collect one any day"—and so on.

And then came the news of the wounding of an old friend, Lt.-Col. R. K. Anderson, D.S.O., Commanding Officer of the 2/32 Batt., A.I.F. His arm had been amputated at Tobruk, and he had been evacuated to an Australian General Hospital near the Canal. I coaxed twenty-four hours' leave from my C.O.—no more—which meant twenty hours' travelling and four to spend with Andy and friends among the hospital staff.

The train for Egypt pulled up where it crossed our village road, and pushed by Peter and hauled by the conductor, I scrambled up its steep side at ten o'clock and arrived at the Canal in the early evening.

It was reassuring to find Andy in great form. I had been his family's physician back in my old general practice days, and had in fact guided his two elder children into the world. He was amazed that anyone could be so comfortable in a hospital. "If I happen to mention that perhaps something might possibly be

LT.-COL. R. K. ANDERSON, D.S.O.



A MAHALA ON THE PALM-FRINGED TIGRIS.

nice—some time—there it appears before the words are out of my mouth!"

"What are you going to do next?" I asked, looking at that empty sleeve. "Well," said Andy slowly, "They want me to go home, but I'm not going. Can't leave the boys. I may need an extra batman, but a man can lead a battalion with one arm just as well as with two!"

I reflected how he had been one of the first of Australia's permanent military staff to join the A.I.F.—his very number was WX3—how he had left home with the first contingent in 1939, and how devoted he was to his wife and kiddies. Two and a half years' separation—and refusing this Heaven-sent opportunity for a sight of them! The quiet deep voice went on, talking about his boys of the 2/11 and 2/32 Battalions.

"They fight like—like gods! Go on in face of shells and bombs, walk right into it, just as if they were going into Young & Jackson's for a quick one on the way home from work!"

And later he said—"It doesn't matter what happens to you or to me, Mary, it is what is best for Australia that we have to think of . . . ."

Transport back to the station was easy. An officer came along with a staff car—"Any friend of Andy's can command me at any time, day or night," said he.

The Palestine train got off about midnight, and soon I was asleep in a comfortable bunk. But the Railway Transport Officer's clerk in booking my sleeper had omitted to mention that Major Thornton was a woman! So I was soon awakened by a hullabaloo out in the passage—the Arab conductor contributing of his best, and a bored voice exclaiming—

"But there's a blooday woman in my bunk!" and shouts of laughter and ribald comments, the most printable was to the effect that it was nothing to moan about, anyhow! I called out that the young gentleman was welcome to the upper bunk if only he would shut up and let me go to sleep. The conductor had a brainwave, came in and removed the spare bedding, which he made up for the new arrival on the floor of the next cabin, so all was well. And at

11 a.m. the train pulled up by the orange grove and I was helped down the footboard by Peter, bless him! And only one hour A.W.L.

Next morning at daybreak there arrived beneath my window an Arab gang bent on converting the sandy road into a bitumen one. First came a heavily loaded camel, led by a small boy in a dirty gown and crocheted skull-cap. The camel knelt down, snarling, the boy unloosed an avalanche of limestone blocks, and a yabbering mob armed with hammers fell upon the boulders and smashed them into road metal. A sleep-destroying business.

More Arabs arrived, some to dig sand, some to spread the metal. Then the Old Testament scenario was interrupted by the appearance of an almost modern steam-roller, while down the road the camel dozed beside the Tel Aviv bus. B.C. and A.D. all mixed up as usual.

We reverted to B.C. for the tarring process. The asphalt was carried in baskets—for some unknown reason it did not trickle through—and was poured on to the metal and spread by the hands of the operatives. Tough guys.

Work progressed noisily and merrily till mid-day, the hour for prayer. Each man knelt and swayed himself vigorously up and down for some time, then off they went, leaving the whole width of the road out of action, and the steam roller blocking the sandy "footpath."

That night a Jerry buzzed over and dropped a bomb on Tel Aviv, and in Jaffa next morning I asked my Arab hairdresser had much damage been done? "Oh no," replied she. "They only killed six Jews!"

Peter and I returned one evening from a country trip to find all our luggage packed and liberally splashed with painted code marks as per army instructions. At last our Movement Order had come through, and the batman I shared with the two padres had packed all my clothes as well as theirs. Padre Richard, to our great sorrow, was not to accompany us, his health not being up to the high standard required for the Persian Gulf area.

Great excitement as the staff of our general hospital assembled on a stark railway siding, to await the troop train that was to take us down to Egypt. Officers and men in open-necked shirts and shorts, tin hats and respirators lying at their feet. Sisters in the gay white dresses and red or red-edged capes which form the tropical uniform of the Queen Alexandra Imperial Military Nursing Service. Many of the men, my sergeant among them, wore the purple and green Palestine ribbon of the medal awarded to soldiers on service in Palestine during the "trouble" of 1938. There was a great feeling of "going places" at last!

At noon we got under weigh, arriving at el Kantara at midnight, and I hurried to telephone the Australian hospital and enquire about Andy, only to find that complications had set in and he was very ill.

Across the Canal by ferry and into the Suez train, which left to the tune of an air-raid siren. A bomb dropped somewhere near the line. Quite like train-travel in Old England—except that there was only one bomb! About 7 a.m. we pulled in at a wharf, breakfasted and were taken aboard our troopship by lighters, and we got away the same day—as good luck would have it, for that very night the "Georgic" was sunk in Suez Harbour.

I took the eye of the ship's doctor, old, fat, Dutch and drunk, and felt I had tumbled down the amatory scale. He saw me one day out of khaki, in my solitary sports frock (somehow I had got into the deck tennis finals) and exclaimed if I was his wife how he would dress me! So I answered, very firmly and coldly, that my husband liked me to dress in black.

"Ach! I can understand that. So other men will not look at you!"

I yelled with mirth as in a mirror I caught sight of my weather-beaten countenance. What but the kindest of hearts could actuate a compliment like that? I submitted to having my hand kissed!

The second night out we saw the Southern Cross. I thought of my splendid companions of the last voyage, some of them dead and some taken prisoner.

Of Andy, probably dying, and his gallant boys. And I fished up a pencil and wrote this—

The troopship's long-drawn wake falls off afar,
The murky ocean scarcely seems to move.
Who knows what hides beneath the blue-black
depths?
But where the sea meets sky our cruiser lies,
And over her appears the Southern Cross.

The pointers first, twin lamps above the sea,
Then all five stars, bright like the Star of old
Which lit the stone-capped hills of wild Judæa.
But then the message was of joyous birth,
And now of noise, home-hunger, wounds and death.

Australia's Cross—the sacrifice it asks
Is suffering to carry down the years,
Or death upon the shores of Greece or Crete,
Or under Hermon's cedars in far Lebanon,
Or on the stormy sands of wild Tobruk.

Our fathers sailed long since across this sea
In little ships which struggled bravely on.
They took and held our land 'gainst flame and flood.
We, too, shall pass, but she shall live and grow
Victorious beneath her Southern Cross.

So now from outback runs near gibber plains,
And out of flowered city homes they come,
Our brave, our splendid boys, who give their all.
O God! if Thy Will made this Cross for us,
Grant to our leaders Vision matched with theirs!

CHAPTER XIII

WE approached Bombay in a monsoon, hot, wet, steamy. A great city, built on an island reclaimed from marshes which had surrounded the seven rocks forming the original Portuguese settlement. The number and misery of the beggars horrified me. Accustomed as I was to cries of "backsheesh," often more or less rhetorical, I had never imagined such poverty as I saw presented in the emaciated bodies and afflicted eyes of these poor creatures.

Of course, Bombay also had its bright side. Indian women, lithe and beautiful in their pastel-shaded saris, managed to look cool and decorative whatever the temperature. In one of the large European shops I came on a group at the silk counter. They were very friendly and chatted happily to me in good English.

At a dinner party, an Indian woman doctor was also a guest. Her sari was of the softest salmon toning, and suited her dark skin perfectly. She was lovely. As we talked a little quiet "shop" in a corner, I was struck more forcibly than ever by this East-West incongruity. Odd indeed it was to hear information as to the merits and demerits of new methods of treatment issuing from the lips of this Arabian-nights looking damsel.

I heard something of the great work being done for women by women in the clinics. The little doctor told me, her great brown eyes shining, how mothers, once terrified of hospitals and medical centres, were now clamouring for ante-natal treatment, with consequent beneficial effect on the infant mortality rate. She was very interested in our methods in Australia and New Zealand, where we have every assistance from Nature to keep our rate low. So many of their diseases are practically non-existent with us.

The Doctor's husband, a surgeon, was also a keen sociologist, and spoke of India's gradual awakening to the advantages of modern science, which had increased tremendously during his lifetime. I formed the impression that the members of my profession were keen and determined to take nothing for granted: their

approach to every problem seemed to be along strictly scientific lines. I had always thought of India as a land of visionaries. Of this determination to get to the bottom of things I had further experience later in our desert hospital, when Indian doctors came to study my specialty with me.

We remained for a fortnight in Bombay, waiting for a ship to take us up the Persian Gulf, and I helped my fellow-officers choose presents for their wives in the bazaars. Months later, we heard that the silk stockings and real silk materials had arrived safely in England, to the delight of girls who had forgotten the luxury of "silk next the skin."

Street scenes were fascinating. A man with a snake in a basket, which he produced to be killed by a horrible ferrety-looking thing called a mongoose, a silent and deadly worker. A horoscope expert holding bits of paper covered with hieroglyphics, which he said meant that the war would end in 1941!

Bullock carts with their basket-hoods wider at the top than where attached to the wagon. A sacred cow, horns lacquered red and a garland round her neck, put herself to sleep on the footpath outside the entrance to the Post office. Everybody walked round her, of course she was not to be disturbed! A scribe sat on the footpath under the shade of a piece of canvas, and his customers crowded round while he executed their orders, not with stylus or quill, but on an up-to-date typewriter.

Just a tiny glimpse of India, but enough to make one eager for more!

Then back upon the Indian Ocean, with the monsoon for a head wind. Horrible!

For years our little troopship had been employed in the transport of pilgrims and mules. The crew had a pet which wandered round the decks—a large white goat, named Neville, from the expression on his face, they said!

Our trip up the Persian Gulf we finished one evening at dusk. I was thrilled to hear "You'll be sorry" coming from somewhere, and tore up to investigate, letting out a wild cooee as I recognised the Australian

corvette "Yarra" named after the river which flows at the foot of my garden at home. I would not have screeched so happily had I realised that she was in a few months to go down in the Battle of the Solomons.

We disembarked at Basrah on a sunny summer morning in August, 1941, at the ungodly hour of 4 a.m. Even so early it was hot, a nasty steamy heat. I always did find it hard to feel romantic in the heat, but I tried to forget it and remind myself that here I was in Bessorah, the famous centre of Arabic literature—and the jumping-off place of Sindibad the Sailor, that is how the Arabs spell him. This wide estuary, the Shatt al Arab, was formed by the union of those rivers of antiquity, the Euphrates and the Tigris, and just a few miles north is the reputed site of the Garden of Eden. If it was anything like this, I thought grimly, wiping from my face the mud which had once been powder, no wonder they ate apples to get out of it!

Around the river were wharves, and beyond the wharves desert—not nice and bright like the golden sand of Egypt, but a salty oyster-gray cake which the wind blew into powder, and the sunlight was thrown up from it in a stabbing glare. I recalled the 1914-18 Tommy's classic description of Mesopotamia—"Miles and miles of nothing, with a dirty stream down the centre!" Troops everywhere of course, mostly Indians wearing khaki shirts outside their shorts, and turbans intricately folded.

The Matron and I were met and driven by station wagon to our temporary quarters: the Sisters were all remaining in India until such time as our hospital became established. The Matron was a remarkable woman, large and dark, she combined the temper of the devil with the vocabulary of Elizabeth Tudor and the heart of a child. Brigadiers wilted before the sparks from her angry eye, but anyone in trouble went straight to her and found her the kindest of friends.

For the welfare of her nursing sisters she fought like a tigress: she could give them hell, but pity help any outsider who dared to criticise one of them! A

superlative dramatic actress—how she could have played Shakespeare! Like Gertrude Bell, she had been a student of Lady Margaret Hall, Oxford, and in 1916, a junior nurse in the very house to which we were being taken.

And what a house! We had passed dozens of squat mud brick residences en route—but here was something like a dwelling! And so well it might be, seeing that originally it had sheltered the harem of a sheik! Built of stone on the bank of the palm-fringed Tigris —which means the "Arrow," from the swiftness of its current—the Beit Blank was entered through wooden double doors rising to a peak at the top.

Its lofty hall was floored with tiles of a conventional Arabic pattern in blue, black, and white, and a massive staircase divided into two flights leading one on each side to a gallery, from which opened spacious, beautifully proportioned rooms. All the ceilings were richly painted Madonna blue, cherry and gold, also in conventional design.

Between house and river there had been a rose garden, but Indian soldiers were busy finishing that off by digging slit trenches. In a day or two we were going to war with Persia, though it was all very hush-hush and one was supposed to assume they were tearing up rose-bushes for exercise!

The Beit Blank was now a Sisters' Mess, accommodating a few English and several Anglo-Indian sisters from the Combined British and Indian Hospitals operating near by. The Matron and I were each allotted an Indian bearer (wild bush wallahs) who had to be trained to wait on us at table and keep our rooms tidy. Training people—black, white, brown or yellow, was no trouble to the Matron, she had been stationed in India for years and soon made efficient servants of them. But to me, with my "White Australia" traditions, that black arm, below its short khaki sleeve, creeping above my shoulder with a plate was about as welcome as a cobra. Just at first. However, I ended up by wishing I could bring Lalla home to do the housework!

After breakfast that first morning, the Matron and

I sat under a huge electric fan trying to remember what we could of the history of the place. She had known Miss Bell out here during the last war: I had read the Letters when they were first published, very carefully, with an open atlas, as an antidote to some depressing cancer work I was doing at that time.

The surrounding country was once the Land of Shinar: here, we are told in Genesis, a plain was found by the sons of Noah and "they did live there." Here, somewhere within sight, once lived the sons of Noah! I smiled as I recalled the treasured Noah's Ark of my childhood, with Seth, Ham, and Japheth wearing long gowns like the Iraqis — little wooden figures whom my sister and I entertained at tea with a doll's teaset. And "they did build a city and a Tower"— the Tower of Babel. And the Lord scattered them away from this Plain of Shinar upon the face of all the earth. And from them descended Abraham, who was born up the desert a bit at a place called Ur of the Chaldees, excavated of late by Sir Leonard Woolley. And the country where we had come to work was the Cradle of the Nations—the Assyrian and the Hebrew races first opened their eyes in this heat!

But old Father Noah's sons were not the first people to have lived around the Plain of Shinar. A learned priest of Babylon—Babylon, just up the line —wrote a history of the country after the mighty city was conquered by Alexander. Only scraps of this story remain, but they suggest that the aborigines might have come from some race living outside the "world" enveloped by the Flood. Possibly they were the descendants of Cain.

The Royal Library of Nineveh in the British Museum—tablets covered by cuneiform writings—has given experts information about the customs and beliefs of these ancient Chaldeans. They believed in spirits, they worshipped a Fish-God who inhabited the depths of the sea, and whose son mediated between the God and suffering mankind. Some of the tablets give dialogues between father and son, in one of which the White Cedar is mentioned as the tree which breaks the power of evil spirits. To this day the white cedar is

incorporated in many Persian carpets. It is considered a lucky tree and is very popular around the Tigris.

Letters were brought in—twenty-two of them!—and first I opened one from Andy. He said he was feeling very well indeed, and I put it down delighted with this good news. Next I opened one with handwriting strange to me. It was from the Matron of the Australian Hospital at el Kantara—Andy was dead!

Outside my bedroom window was a straggling wattle tree, and I collected some seed and enclosed it in my letter to the Matron, asking her to plant Australia's national flower on the grave of this great Australian. Before my letter had reached Egypt, that Matron herself had been killed in a road accident.

From Head-quarters arrived an officer bringing orders. The Matron was to "rest" until our hospital got going.

"God of Battles," cried she. "Am I to sit here doing nothing for weeks?"

I managed to talk myself into a job in a Combined British and Indian Hospital which had an X-ray plant and no radiologist. It was grand fun working with Indians. My technician spoke good English and most of the dialects. They called me "Major Mem-Sahib" and waited on me hand and foot. No housework for me here! A happy, laughing crowd were the staff of that hospital. A particular pet was Uncle, a grey-bearded Sikh with a top-knot, who looked every minute of ninety, but was probably only half that, or he would not have been on active service. Uncle's favourite sport was sitting in a patch of shade rolling plaster bandages with the help of his bare toes. All these orderlies wore their khaki shirts out over their shorts. Some of the officers were English, some Indian, and they messed and worked together with the utmost co-operation.

CHAPTER XIV

OUTSIDE my window at the Beit Blank our dhobi did the washing beneath a white cedar tree, his equipment a tub of dirty water and a table. Out of the tub would come a sheet, to be folded in halves and bashed down on the table perhaps fifty times, and miraculously such articles as survived the treatment came out snowy white!

The heat was excruciating—a moist, steamy heat. Often 115° to 120° in the shade at midday, rising one day to 130°. Everyone slept for a couple of hours in the afternoon, returning to work after tea. Our own hospital site had been chosen, miles out in the desert, and the officers and men, sweltering there in tents, envied me my job in a brick building and billets in a house.

To my mind, the brightest spot on that wide horizon was the swimming-pool of the Shatt al Arab Hotel, patronised by flying boat passengers, Arab civilians, and doubtless many Bill Harris's (bilharzia) in spite of a weekly clean-out and disinfection. Nobody minded. It was cool.

The only other cool spot in the area was the bar of the hotel, and was it popular? The Army had kindly overlooked its air-conditioning plant when requisitioning those from other parts of the building. My idea of a thoroughly enjoyable sequel to a busy day was—

Boy friend with transport ..	1 or more
Swim at hotel	,,
Beer at hotel	,,
Boats with cobbers	Several

These trips up the moonlit Tigris were glorious. The broad stream flowed swiftly between the date palms, with here and there wide canals running off into the plantations. This irrigation of the district adjacent to the river means that Basrah can supply about three-quarters of the world's demand for dates. The fruit was ripening now—lovely golden bunches on spikes of drooping dark green.

Flat-roofed houses along the waterfront, like our Beit Blank. Shadowy black figures flitting here and there among the dwellings of a village. Shacks were made of mats woven from palm leaves and sewn together, the roofs being daubed with mud. Goats and hens huddled outside—probably inside, too!

These river banks were thickly populated when the country flourished under the Abassid caliphs in "The golden prime of good Haroun al Rashid." There was an old Arab poem including the lines—

"A cock could hop from house to house
From Baghdad to Basrah."

So I was told by my friend the Librarian at the Iraqian Library at Asshar.

Basrah nights were generally cool, and we had moonlight picnics in little boats, or balams, something like canoes with high curved prows, each propelled by an Iraqi with a single oar. It looked to me like a baseball bat, nothing very interesting about it, but I was told that its use was peculiar to these parts from ancient times. Larger boats (mahalas) like the feluccas of Egypt, sailed the Shatt al Arab. They looked only large enough for river craft, and yet for centuries they had passed down the Gulf and crossed the ocean to trade with India.

At this time, tension was thick in the air. Were we going to invade Iran? Were the Persians going to attack us? At a dinner party given one night by the officers of a non-combatant unit, we were dancing under the stars on a wooden platform placed on the sand outside the Mess. There were only about two dozen white sisters in Basrah at that time, most of them off duty and dancing at this party. It was an exciting moment when my partner whispered in my ear—"They say the flag will go up to-night."

I thought of the eve of Waterloo—

"And Belgium's capital had gathered then
Her beauty and her chivalry."

Here were my companions and I, dancing gaily to a gramophone, the sisters in smart evening frocks, and somewhere across the river were men watching,

watching tensely, for any movement on the part of the enemy.

Preparations had been made to "get the girls home early," and we had been in bed a couple of hours when the Persian war started off in great style, with guns woofing at Abadan about thirty miles away.

Then came the tragedy of casualties—Tommies, Indians, Persians. The Germans had seized all the Iranian wheat crop: the prisoners we took were positively emaciated and glad to find themselves in hospital.

"We knew it was hopeless," a young Persian officer told me while I was locating a bullet in his neck. "The English were too strong, but our German officers said they would wipe us out if we did not fight." His eyes were the bluest I had seen outside Ireland. The bullet was removed from his neck but he had other wounds and did not survive.

After we had finished off the Persian incident, work at the hospital became fairly slack, and one evening I wandered into the Shatt al Arab Hotel for a haircut. In those days, haircuts were a social function. Later, with more hospitals opening and English sisters more numerous, the procedure became much more formal. But when I went up first, Mr. Jeremiah Houdaromarini (he said I might call him Mr. Jeremiah, as I found strife with his surname) did a spot of entertaining along with work. His boy friends, to the number of four or five, squatted round on the floor of the saloon, their kaffiyehs wound round their waists. The mode in kaffiyeh varied somewhat from Palestine, where near-white was in vogue. Here large blue and white checked cotton formed the headdress, and viewed from above, the squatters looked rather like a drunk's idea of a breakfast-table! They watched Mr. Jeremiah working on the shaggy mane I had acquired, and gave voluble advice. A Bond Street hairdresser might be disconcerted if half a dozen loafers dropped into his saloon to tell him how to do the job, but an Arab, I have noticed, always likes to have several watchers when he is doing anything. When these are Arabs too, naturally he does not expect

them to do anything but yabber all the time. In fact, Mr. Jeremiah had cups of thick black coffee handed round—no doubt I paid for them!

On this evening, actually the office of British Imperial Airways, situated in the foyer, was open. Generally it was closed by a shutter, but now a 'plane was expected. A brilliant poster announced that in a mere week one could fly from Basrah to Sydney. I wanted to howl like a dog! Just imagine—almost in the wink of an eyelid this frightful wilderness could be exchanged for the golden sands of Bondi or Manly, that is, if—

I was still ruminating about it when I returned to the Beit Blank and found a letter from my husband, saying he would give anything to get me home. That clinched it. Anything, I considered, ought to cover a couple of hundred pounds—

I took a taxi to the Post Office and sent off a cable "Flying home, month's leave, please wire fare," and then set about getting the month's leave.

The Commanding Officer of the Combined British and Indian Hospital thought I had worked hard during the busy time and deserved a holiday. My own C.O. thought if I went to Australia I would probably not come back! So he was all for it! The result of their combined representations to H.Q. was the sanctioning of a month's leave, on the very day that British Airways rang up and said my ticket had been bought in Australia. Guardian angel on job as usual!

Then one morning, just before I was due to leave, I was aroused by a burning pain in three fingers, due to the action of X-rays. So H.Q. came good with three months' sick leave on top of the ordinary month! Cheers! The pain was forgotten for the moment—the prospect of fourteen weeks at home dominated everything else.

CHAPTER XV

IT was pitch dark when an Arab waiter brought me a cup of tea in my sumptuous bedroom at the Shatt al Arab Hotel, where I had spent the night before departure. It should have seemed so luxurious, but it was quite wasted on me, for I was too excited to sleep a wink. Sydney in a week!

A sleepy but very courtly Embarkation Staff Officer had been roused from his bed at 3.30 to conduct me out to the Flying Boat. If ever a man had an excuse for a "that bloody woman" look he had, as the Boat roosted only a hundred yards from the hotel door, and my luggage comprised merely a small suitcase and haversack, quite within my own carrying capacity. But he was politeness itself: anyhow I could not have seen the look if it were there, so tightly were the poor thing's eyelids jammed together with sleep!

I danced across the hotel lawn and on to the launch under a velvety black sky, whose pale stars gave but little light. The giant 'plane, like a prehistoric flying fish, sat out on the Shatt al Arab, its floats just clearing the water. My first ride in an aeroplane! Old Sindibad the Sailor had nothing on me in the way of thrill and anticipation when he "took a ship" off this very river bank!

I shook hands with the Embarkation Staff Officer and the engines started with a horrible roar, for the lining of the plane that would usually muffle it, had been torn out to decrease weight and allow the passage of more mails. We took off away up into the blue. An attentive steward undid my safety belt—needed only for taking off and landing—and handed me a strawberry box, into which I promptly deposited the early morning cup of tea.

Dawn was breaking. The silvery stars, which one felt should be all around, not still up above, were disappearing, and suddenly the sun came up with a rush and illumined the desert below with a flood of amber. Ships on the Persian Gulf looked like porpoises, so high were we above them.

First stop Bahrein, down at the foot of Saudi Arabia, three hours' flight from Basrah. The plane circled round, and I stopped trying to be sick on nothing, to enjoy what I saw. A curving yellow sand-line, and desert fading off into a haze. The sea dotted with tiny boats, and among them a long white line like the wake of a ship. This, I was told, was caused by fish-spawn. The colouring was exquisite—the sapphire depths of the Bay of Bahrein, next a submerged island of shallows showing turquoise splashed with amethyst from rocks, and gold from sandbanks. Shimmering white foam over all. For the first time, I appreciated the expression, "a jewelled sea." Bahrein itself, from ancient days an important pearling centre, looked like a child's model of a city, with bits of garden here and there.

Nobody had told me that an aeroplane rolls on one side before landing, and I nearly died of fright when I saw straight ahead what appeared to be the slope of a sandy mountain, for which we were apparently heading at tremendous speed. But the precipitous slope straighted out into flat desert as the 'plane reverted to the horizontal, and we came down beside it on a strip of calm water—all, Allah be praised, in one piece! It had been very cold up top: the temperature rose about twenty degrees within a few minutes.

Breakfast at the comfortable Airways Rest House was most acceptable. Only three other passengers, two Army Officers bound for India, and an American aircraft engineer who had been working with the R.A.F. and was returning home. The crew had to play around with the engine for two or three hours, but we took off about midday, and went to India. Just like that.

Flying over the ocean was grand: the ship behaved like a bird and not like some species of aerial caterpillar, as it did over land. We passed above fluffy white islands like bundles of cotton wool—clouds! Once we looked down on a rainbow, but there were no pots of gold at the ends. There were no ends, for

it was a complete circle, illuminating the silky fluff on which it rested.

The ship "landed on the sea" at Karachi about ten, in the dark and semi-blackout. After our baggage was examined and passports checked, we drove to a hotel, dined, and were in bed by midnight. A long day, but even so it hardly seemed worth while going to bed, with another 3.30 call!

And then across India. Swampy paddy fields, temples with gilded domes, high mountains, and the Sacred Ganges, all unfortunately a confused blur, because mountains do things to the atmosphere and create air pockets, in and out of which the ship bounced like a football. And my stomach behaved like a Rugby scrum, and my brain became as a pot of well-stirred porridge. One thing I do remember, though—coming down on a perfect little gem of a blue lake, set among towering peaks. Wide steps of white concrete from the landing stage up to the Rest House, wide white terraces surrounded by tubs of flowers of every conceivable hue.

Calcutta that night, and morning tea at 4 a.m. After the two consecutive 3.30 calls, it was almost, but not quite, refreshing to sleep in until four! The Bay of Bengal was a short hop, and we reached Burma early in the afternoon. In Rangoon Harbour were countless small craft, all round the 'drome. I thought our pilot exceedingly skilful when he came down without making sawdust of them.

Naturally enough from their geographical position, the Burmese seem intermediate in type between the Indians and the Chinese. Dark spaniel eyes like the Indians, but skin yellow-brown rather than brown or yellow, and a definitely Mongolian cast of face. Their clothes were of hard brilliant colours—scarlet trousers, Royal blue shirts, and they wore the flat conical hat of the coolie.

I had shopping to do in Rangoon, as our next stop was to be Bangkok, in Thailand—neutral country, where any passenger coming down in uniform would be interned! The pilot offered to lend me his spare shirt and shorts, but I was delighted at the chance

of wearing mufti and bought myself a real silk frock. Certainly, it had been munched in two places by some of the beasties prevalent in those parts, but I got it for half price, and subsequently I worked flowers over the holes.

A 4.30 call next morning—how lazy we were becoming! We had to wait for a new passenger, who thought 4.30 early. Our bespectacled American stalked up and down the hotel lounge, very frisky after an early night. "In America, if anyone is late, it is just too bloody bad. They miss the plane."

We got off eventually, and below there appeared a new form of temple. Gone was the dome of the Indian shrine, the highest part of these Burmese places of worship took the form of a fluted gilt hood, shining under the tropical sun, and outside these lay gigantic figures of the Lord Buddha, painted pink and yellow. Irrigation channels made a regular pattern through dark green rice fields.

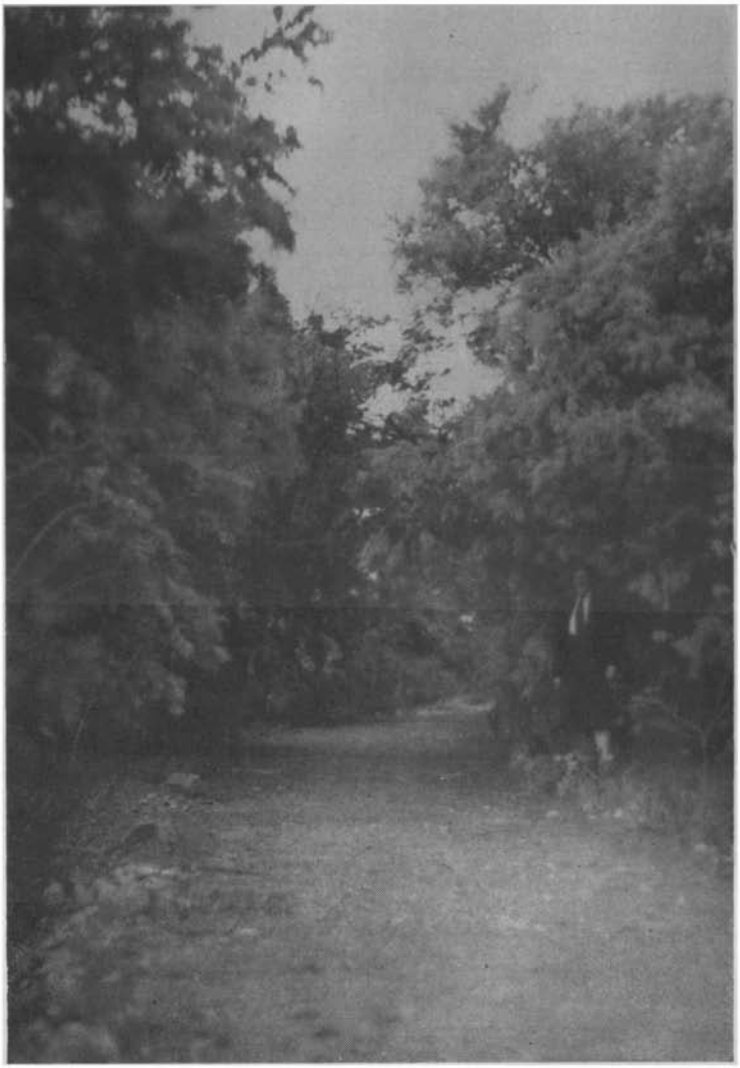
Thailand appeared to be very similar to Burma. At Bangkok we refuelled, and had a great to-do over passports. The Siamese, or Thailanders as they were then, looked much like the Burmese, and so did the Malayans at Singapore, which was reached that night.

At the aerodrome I was met not merely by one, but by two of my family! My stepson, breaking his usual practice of working until eleven so as to make a night of it, and my young brother, who had been granted leave for the occasion from his camp up near the Thailand border. Only nineteen months since I had seen them, but it might have been so many years, such a welcome did I get!

We drove along the ill-starred Causeway—later to play its tragic part in the isolation of Singapore Island — for a spot at Headquarters Mess. More old friends there, but some strangers, who speculated as to where Kent Hughes had got the Sultana from! It was heavenly to be surrounded by greenery after the arid waste of the Persian Gulf area.

"Don't you dare go home and tell them this is a pretty place!" I was scolded. "It's a lousy hole. Heat, flies, mosquitoes . . . ."

AN IRRIGATION CANAL THROUGH BASRAH'S PALM GROVES.



I SPENT ALL MY LEAVE AT HOME IN WARRANDYTE.

We were joined by an old friend who was the Australian Deputy Director of Medical Services, and the four of us drove around Singapore looking for somewhere to eat, as my brother, a full private in the infantry, was not exactly persona grata at Raffles' Hotel, where I stayed the night.

We saw dozens of yellow Malayan children crowding round Diggers who threw them sweets and called them "Joe." My brother told a yarn of how, when the A.I.F. first arrived, the natives were not very well versed in English, let alone Australian!

"Give me a packet of Black and White, Joe," said a Digger at a stall.

"No Black and White."

"Oh well," replied the Digger, "I'll have a packet of those other bees."

"No Bees, either," said the coon regretfully. "Only Capstans!"

They learnt!

Here were brilliant flowers and gaily coloured clothes. We found a little Chinese restaurant where we dined and wined hilariously. A small cool room, the door screened by dark green silk curtains. Chinese lanterns gave a subdued light, and bright notes of colour were provided by scarlet poinsettias in pots. Inscrutable waiters, silent and almost sinister in dark shirts over wide trousers. The two red-tabbed officers, my Digger brother and I laughed and joked and talked of home—in Melbourne the three men had lived within a mile of one another. We tried hard to keep down the undercurrent of something not quite right which cropped up every so often.

My brother had been given a lift, down from a hundred and fifty miles up the jungle in Johore, by their Brigadier—they all looked up to him as a grand sport and a great chap. He had enjoyed the luxury of a ride in a staff car, not the usual mode of transport for privates! A more comfortable trip than his next, when, as one of the 2/29 Battalion, he was to fight his way back to Singapore inch by inch, only to be forced to surrender on the Beach. Gilbert Mant's "Grim

Glory" tells something about that tragic retreat, but the story will be told in full only when the story of Malaya can be told—after we have won back what is left of our Eighth Division.

Talking to this long thin Digger, whose face I had washed and whose pants I had smacked twenty years before, I remembered how as a boy he had hated killing things, and what a rumpus there had always been when Mother wanted a fowl sacrificed to our rapacious appetites! Oh, a gay night, and memorable . . . .

Next day, for the first time I did not mind being sick, for the end of that day was to bring . . . Australia! At Koepang, in Dutch Timor, we came down for petrol, and how I grudged the time spent steaming round the beautiful bay in a launch, while the 'plane was refuelling.

At last a smudge in the distance came into focus as the northern coast of my own land, and the sea impinged on miles and miles of gum trees and a small settlement—Darwin! I could not scramble quickly enough on to that dear red soil, but alas! I was not welcomed with open arms by the Quarantine authorities. The doctor met me coldly. The "that bloody woman" look of the Pommies was as a warm and genial glow compared with the beam that countryman and colleague turned on me. Something to do with a wretched vaccination certificate, or lack of it! However, the matter was amicably settled at last in a way which would not have been approved by my C.O., had he known about it. But whatever my shortcomings as an officer and gentleman, I always tried to spare my betters knowledge likely to raise their blood-pressures.

Immediately on being allowed to land, I flew to a telephone box and put through a call home. The deep man's voice developed in my absence by my baby, whom I had left singing treble in the Grammar School choir, nearly blasted me out of the booth.

Townsville next, a lovely spot, and then Sydney, where I was refused a bed in one of the hotels on the grounds that I had next to no luggage! Indeed,

I thought ruefully, my native land does not seem so keen on me as I am on it!

In Melbourne, that was soon altered. All my dear ones at the aerodrome, the telephone ringing half the night, letters and wires pouring in next day. Home at last! I felt that I had died and been in another world for those twenty months.

CHAPTER XVI

SPRING was glorious at Warrandyte, the old "sitting down place" of the aborigines. Just a blaze of golden wattle, with roses everywhere, over the banks and terraces, under the wattle trees, creeping in the windows. Primroses, violets and daffodils fringing the pathways, and the scented brown boronia. Kookaburras laughed their welcome in the gullies, the Dandenongs rising blue and placid across the wooded foothills. I settled down quickly into the old happy role of wife and mother, instead of being just a body to be slung around the world at the will of the war machine.

I was not able at this stage, to draw any comparison between wartime Melbourne and cities less remote from the war, for I was still off colour and spent all my time, very happily, at home in the country.

Then one night, after a heavy day's work in his surgery, my husband died very quietly, all in a few minutes, after a lifetime spent in the service of mankind. Australia's first specialist in foot surgery, he might have restored the fallen arches of many of those young men rejected for active service because of flat feet. But his services were not required.

One carried on. The gardening had to be done. In the good old days, there were always jobbing gardeners to be had in Warrandyte, old Diggers from the last war, mostly pensioners, who would come in for a day when funds were low and thirsts high.

"You know, Doctor Mary, my back has never been right since Wipers."

"Funny how a bit of digging upsets my shrapnel wound . . . ."

"The shell-shock is O.K. if I don't get too much of the sun!"

One really felt a perfect slave driver asking them to work at all! But when in September, 1939, the call came again, aches and pains were forgotten, and immediately the old devils were all back on guard duty in the A.I.F.!

So now, trying to drive a spade through crust responsive only to gelignite, I thought with regret of the Indians and Iraqis who do the pick and shovel work in less favoured parts of the world. Drat this White Australia!

Came Perce, a kindly old neighbour, to mend the pump and yarn. Over a cup of tea we sat looking out across the rose garden to the bush. A white-bearded honeyeater hung upside down on a scarlet bottle-brush. A blue wren preened himself on a pinky rock, his five wee wives, dingy but perky, fussing round him. A yellow breasted robin splashed on the edge of the pool, giving out his bell-like single note every so often until his mate flew down to splash too. A tree-climber ran up the trunk of a gumtree, pecking as he hopped. Bronze native thrushes made the bush ring with their carolling. The old Digger next door had a way with the birds, and many were quite tame.

Perce told me that all the surrounding land, as far as the eye could see, had been taken up a century ago by his grandfather, an ex-cadet of Sandhurst, who had eloped with a high-born lady. On St. Helena he had been for a while, helping to guard Napoleon, and had then emigrated to Australia with his young family. I learnt that all the willows which now flourish on the river banks near the township had been brought as cuttings from Napoleon's island prison.

"And my father," went on my friend, "Brought the first load of wood out of Warrandyte. Took it to Melbourne to buy a copper for his mother, so that she would not have to wash the clothes in the river ....You will find the pump O.K. now, Doc. Cheerioh!"

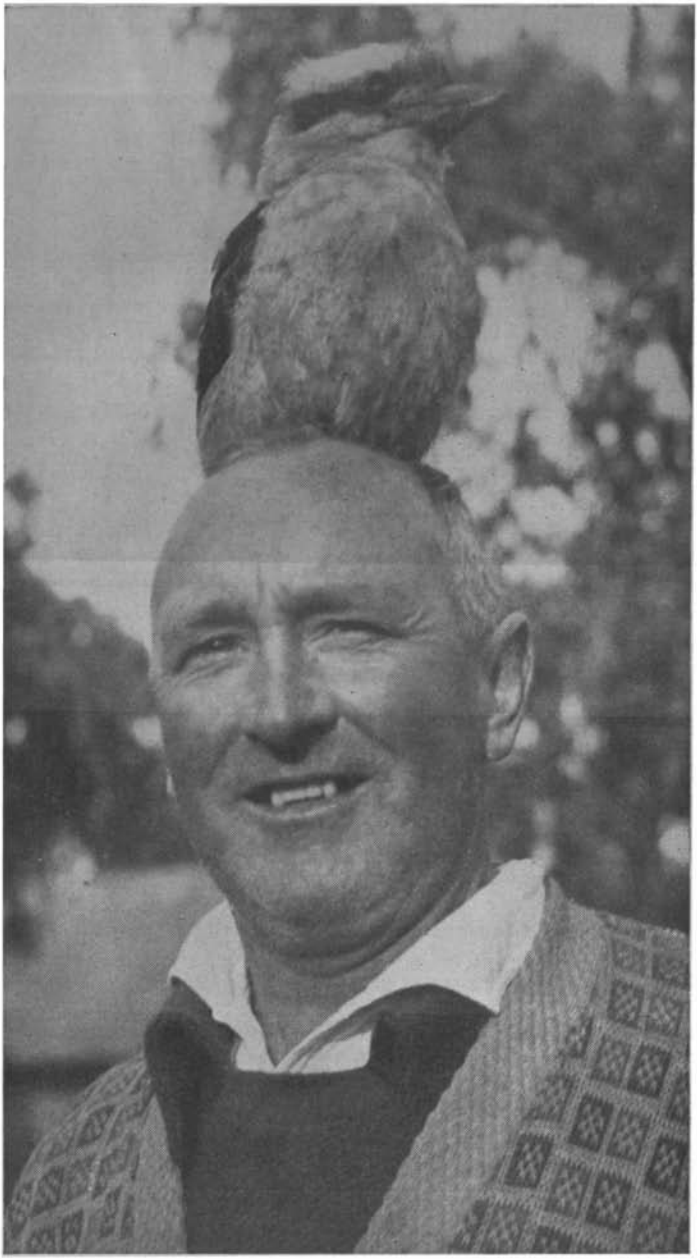
Glints from the setting sun fell on a terrace of pink roses, turning each into a brilliant lamp. The Dandenong Ranges became purple and gold in splashes, under a crimson sky, and their individual trees were outlined on the horizon. Diamond flashes from where the sun struck a far-off window pane. Between our house and the mountains rolled ten miles of unbroken bush, and the Yarra Yarra cascaded over its reefs in the gully below.

On a rose support just outside the window, a kookaburra sat looking at me, with his head on one side, and his goodnight gurgles echoed from the gullies and the hills. I thought of the well-ordered grounds of Sandhurst as I had seen them—and then of the Sandhurst cadet who years ago had brought a high born lady to do the washing in the river below my garden. For the hundredth time I rejoiced in the spirit of our pioneer women—little wonder their descendants can fight! And how sadly our under-populated country needs more of the same stock! I thought of my Tommies, many of them born and bred on the dole, fed on fish and chips, and starved of sunlight and beauty. Yet, in spite of their physical handicaps, what soldiers they were! How gamely my own unit had accepted the discomforts and scorching heat of desert life, without even a moan. I had seen Tommies die, and, knowing they were dying, remain uncomplaining and cheerful to the last. An R.A.A.F. officer had once said to me—"You know, Mary, these Pommies can teach our fellows how to die!"

How grand it would be, I thought, if we could bring all the homeless children from London and the large towns, and settle them here with their parents . . . . but under a decent immigration scheme, of course, not the disastrous mess which passed for such after the last war. Perhaps a sort of extension on a large scale of the Fairbridge scheme, which brings out Barnardo boys to Western Australia to be trained for farm work. It would pay us to pension the parents so that the children could be brought up under Australian conditions.

And the heroines of the Battle for Britain—what mothers they would make of a future generation—always supposing England could spare some of them and that they wanted to come! Possibly they would, when convinced that Australians were not all descended from convicts! Central Australia's rivers, emptying into a vast subterranean lake, could be made to yield water to support a large population. . . .

"Hey, Mum, that jam's boiled all over the stove," croaked a realist at the door.



THE "OLD DIGGER" NEXT DOOR HAS A WAY WITH THE BIRDS.

JAVANESE WOMEN WERE BUSY WASHING CLOTHES IN A CANAL.

CHAPTER XVII

THE Australian Army Medical Corps had been prevailed upon to appoint one woman doctor—to an office job! But no X-ray specialist need apply!

So there was nothing for it but to return to the British when my leave expired early in January, 1942. My son came as far as Sydney, very pleased at being the only visitor allowed to view the flying boat at anything like close quarters!

We flew north over forests of eucalyptus, currajong and mangrove, over swampy country guttered by branching rivulets which from the air gave the pattern of fern leaves. Groote Island viewed from above resembled a giant starfish—golden sand fringing terra cotta cliffs and wooded hummocks.

At Darwin we found Americans. "What a pity," remarked one of the two young A.I.F. officers who were passengers on the 'plane—"That they had to be landed in this hole! They will get the impression that Australia is not worth fighting for!"

On we flew over clouds and atolls. One cloud far below seemed to keep pace with us, and in it was reflected the shadow of the 'plane—like an albatross. We forged through fluffy mountains of clouds, tipped with pink and gold. No waves could be seen on the azure sea, just flickering spicules of foam like ground glass. The little islands of cloud beneath us were reflected in the water, appearing as purple shadows.

Over volcanic craters long extinct did we fly, over an emerald peak whose summit was obscured by a powder-blue mist. Over seas once traversed in sailing ships by the Spaniard Torres, the early trading Dutch, and Fernandez de Quiros in his quest for the Great South Land, which he called "Australia of the Holy Ghost." At Bima we refuelled beside a Rest House over whose door was written in Dutch, "Welcome, and peace be to you."

Soerabaya was particularly remarkable for the amount of food one was expected to devour. A tremendous dinner included the Dutchman's special

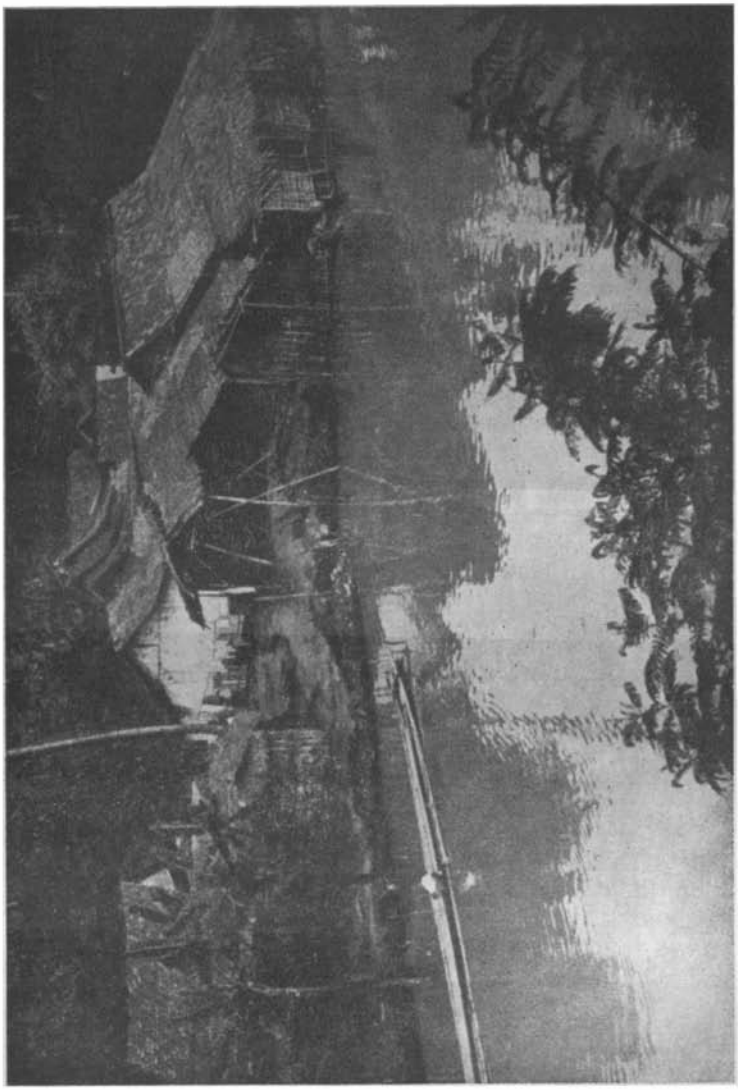
favourite—Rijst-tavel—the components of which were brought in by a convoy of no less than twelve waiters in a line, each bearing down on his victim and presenting two dishes. Spotless and shining was the Hotel Oranji, the bedrooms opening on to a cool verandah flanked by lawn. The bath was a curious affair—square and white tiled. One crouched inside it and emptied water over oneself with a dipper!

To be somewhere near my little brother when the bad time should come, I had decided to lose the plane at Singapore, but I did not get the chance. Japan was well in the war, and the Airways were not risking the big ship by sending it over Malaya. So to Batavia we went instead, and a small 'plane was sent across to Singapore to bring off Mr. Duff Cooper and Lady Diana.

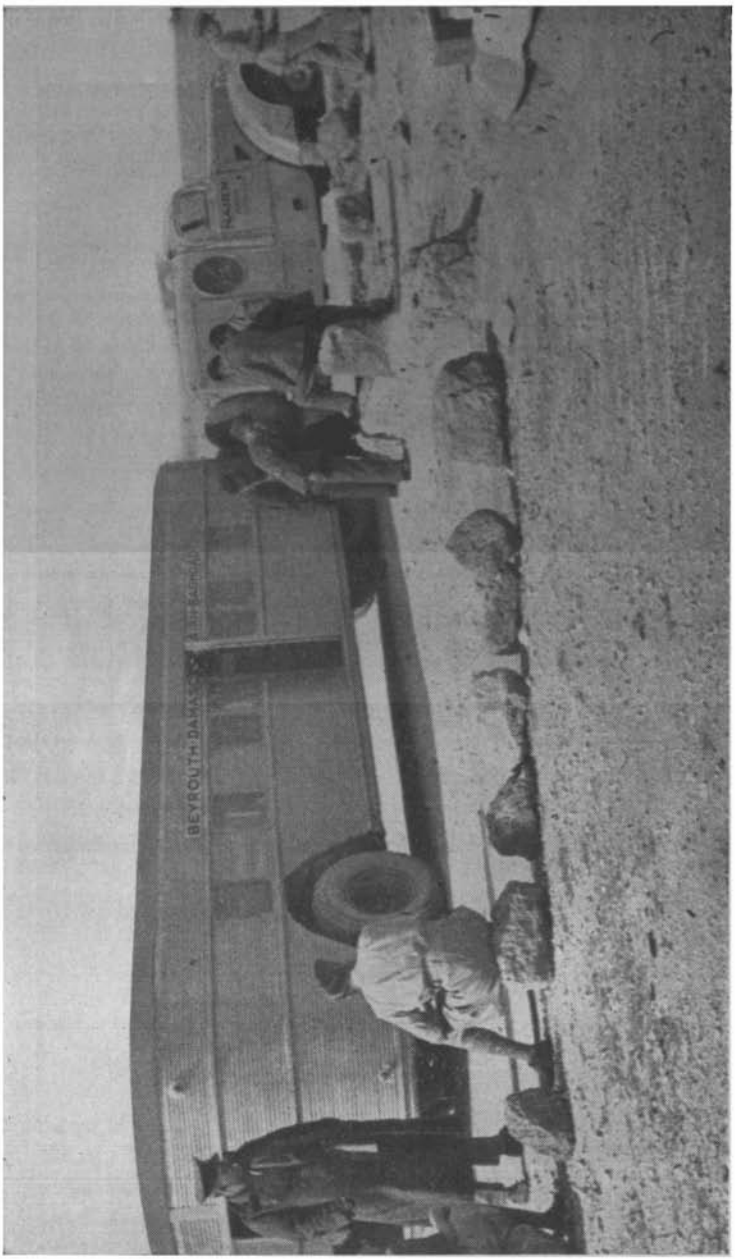
Batavia we found a delightful spot, just oozing prosperity. Buildings shone white in the sunlight, under their red tile roofs. Architecture was plain and solid, with here and there a facade of classic columns . . . . but the brilliant roofs were being hastily painted black, in a pathetic attempt to avert the disaster which was to overtake Java within the next few weeks. The streets were gay with the tango-red blossoms of the gul mohr, so popular in the Indies and the East generally.

Native women were busy washing clothes in a muddy canal. The colourful garments of the Indies were such a happy contrast to the whitish-black and blackish-white à la mode in the Middle East. Smiling gentle-faced children. Chinese temples there were, with porcelain and enamel inlay on the roofs. Their upturned gables gave the shrines an optimistic expression—a kind of invitation to look upward to higher things, like the intention, I believe, which inspired the original Gothic architecture.

Over one shop in the native quarter was exhibited a legend in English—"Tailor—the Beauty for Gentlemen!" Javanese and Chinese porters shuffled along in flat slippers and the conical coolie hat, their long shirts outside their trousers, Indian fashion, and bearing on their shoulders poles with a basket at each



NATIVE DWELLINGS IN JAVA.



WE STOPPED FOR TEA AT ABOU AL CHAMAT.

end. An original kind of sandwich man bore on his pole, instead of baskets, a pair of boards advertising a cinema.

In lieu, as the Army says, of a horse, a bicycle was attached to a small hansom cab, while little victorias —much smaller than the garries of Egypt, were drawn by pairs of tiny ponies. These carriages were ornamented on the back of the seat by two saucy bows of faded embroidered material like Grandma's pants. Throughout the town were patches of emerald lawn surrounded by plots of gerberas and African marigolds. How lovely and smiling a city was Batavia, eight weeks before the debacle!

Port Blair, in the Andaman Islands, later a Japanese base, provided us with an interesting night—an Indian penal settlement of many years' standing. The prisoners could not escape without being devoured by sharks—gruesomely like Sydney's Fort Dennison in the bad old days! Indian prisoners, however, enjoyed life at Port Blair so much that on the expiration of their sentences many sent to India for their wives and families, and lived happily ever after.

The plane passengers were accommodated in a large bare building of an austerity suggesting either a monastery or a courthouse. The head waiter was an elegant brown man whose moustache was dyed to match beer-coloured eyes. He wore a turban, a starched high necked white tunic, and a coloured belt above his white trousers. A perfect vision. He was "in" for no less than three murders, and his aggregate sentences covered a period of seventy years.

"I hear they are giving him monkey glands to make him go the distance," whispered one of the Australian officers. A more sinister looking villain I have never seen off the films; beside him our Iraqi cut-throats would have looked as gentle as doves.

The room allotted to me was high and square, and chastely furnished with one bed and one chair. Just a few feet away, the Indian Ocean lapped on the sand. A small hurricane lamp hung on the wooden chair. In through the open door flew a bat, and it tore madly round the room, fortunately without lighting on me,

and out again by the window. Creepy! I put out the lamp and was very careful to tuck in the mosquito net all round—imagine being shut inside a net with a bat!

I was just dozing off, hoping that the big spider spinning his web in the farthest corner of the ceiling was happy in his work, when a stealthy shuffle in the direction of the door got my eyes open quickly. I shut them with a bang, for there stood the Murderer! Could I possibly get a coo-ee through my paralysed vocal chords before they were pulped by those sinuous fingers?

But the Murderer's intentions were of the best! It was only my suitcase he was after. He removed all my undies, folded them carefully, and repacked them. Then he collected my shoes and stole out, noiseless as a shadow. I let my breath go like an opened cylinder of compressed air. I am not used to having my corsets manhandled by murderers!

In the morning, it was found that the Captain of the Flying Boat was running a temperature of 105°. We could not leave him to the tender mercies of the prisoners, so took him along, and for three days Lady Diana and I nursed him on a mattress in the front of the 'plane. At last we reached a good Indian hospital—at Akyab—where we left him in safety, but still delirious. A charmed life has that man: on his return trip his plane was shot down by Japanese fighters, and he had to swim nearly a mile with a broken leg. And later still, when his ship sank during a terrific storm, he defied sharks and waves for eighteen hours, until he was picked up six miles from shore. Tough!

Calcutta's most modern hotel was a gay spot. The two Aussie lads and I had just seated ourselves at a table for dinner, when a senior officer of the Indian Army asked if we would care to join his party for dinner and the following cabaret. It was a pity, he added, for Australians to get the impression that the English were cold and unfriendly. We accepted gladly. A certain amount of English reserve prevailed of course at that party .... at first! However, we wound up the night with the senior officer playing "Waltzing

Matilda" on my pocket comb and the sort of thin paper that hotels provide gratis. A stirring sight!

Basrah looked less beautiful than ever from the air. Straggly mud-brick houses separated by narrow lanes. Beside the Asshar Creek stood the really fine mosque with its dome of peacock and gold tiles, and on the opposite bank was the Civic Centre—with the University and Library and a few other well-built modern structures. But the tout ensemble . . . . desolate! The 'plane circled over all and made a fine landing on the Shatt al Arab just outside the Hotel at Maqil.

Inside the revolving doors was a great change from the summer scene, when all who could crowded into the air-conditioned bar and the lounge was deserted. Several hospitals, including my own, had opened in the area, and dozens of English sisters had come up from India. Now in the latest evening frocks, those off duty were dining with various naval, army and air force officers. Bright lights, brilliant colourings, laughter and chatter—what a break from routine desert life! Every table in that ultra modern hotel was filled, except for the few reserved for the weary 'plane travellers, who, after twelve days and nights with a minimum of sleep, asked only for a snack and a bed, grateful to the hotel management for its ban on music and dancing!

For sixteen hours did I sleep, then reported by telephone to my unit, and hitched, rather than hiked, the twenty miles out to our camp. The Mess was most surprised at my return. To think of anyone escaping from the place and reappearing not under guard, just did not make sense.

"I had to come back," I groaned. "Radiologists are two a penny at home, they did not want me."

"Well, we want you all right," remarked the Bone-setter. "No one else has been able to get the plant going."

Dear kind Bone-setter! He who had brought me flowers and medicine when I lay sick of the dysentery at Nazareth. I beamed at him, determined to make

that machine work the next day if I had to blow it to bits first.

A newly-erected tent contained my camp bed, a hurricane lamp, and a floor of dusty desert. The Q.M.S., a great supporter of mine, had added gratuitously a shaving mirror, a zinc tub and two kerosene cases, around which were draped my winter woollies, released by the unpacking of the X-ray plant.

And squatting wog-wise in the middle of the floor, fanning busily his gift of a charcoal fire, was Peter the Padre.

I slept like a log that night, except for a few minutes when aroused by a flopping due to the temporary presence of a donkey inside the tent!

CHAPTER XVIII

THE medical section of the hospital was operating in tents in the main camp. Water was plentiful, with a pipe line out from the Tigris to supply all the units in the area, making me think of the ancient days when the Persians had made the desert blossom like the rose with their irrigation schemes. There must have been more than irrigation to it, though, for in spite of watering, my lettuce and other seeds were simply carried off by dust storms. Perhaps the Persians pitched tents over their crops! Taps were provided at intervals along the pipe-line, so that the Iraqis could fill their water pots without the inconvenience of having to bung holes in it—their original idea!

Inside the ward tents, the arrangement of beds and lockers was that of a well-ordered city hospital, with everything spotless and neat, unless one of the bi- or tri-weekly sandstorms was actually whirling through. Floors a bit irregular, certainly, but becoming firm with daily watering.

Four miles away, the surgical wards were accommodated in borrowed brick buildings, the surgeons being transported thence twice a day by truck. They voted me the front seat beside the Indian driver, whose modish khaki turban caught my eye as an inspiration for a smart matron's model for "after the war." A snappy black triangle pointed upwards over the left ear; below, this terminated in a black fringe, and a sort of wimple arrangement kept the sun off the back of the neck. Someone told me once that if they wished to be disrespectful to the Sahibs they tucked up the wimple. Subtle!

At the end of January it was actually cold on the front of the truck, although the sun was shining. From inside the flapping canvas came scraps of conversation—

"The Old Man thinks perhaps we are doing too much surgery."

"Rot, we are not doing half enough, or he would have had his bloody throat cut long ago!"

We passed one of a number of ruined mud-brick forts from which the Turks were driven during the last war. Stark and irregular in outline against the cloudless sky, they might have been relics of ancient Mesopotamian architecture.

With the help of God and the Royal Engineers, we got the plant functioning, and soon fell into our old routine of work, but we missed our mid-morning "cupper" tea. Sarge and Joe, my team from Nazareth, had somehow managed to take under their protection a brand new Primus stove, so I sent in an official requisition for a kettle "necessary for the sterilization of instruments." Great was the rejoicing when the Quartermaster-Sergeant sent the kettle, and, in order to show how thoroughly he understood the requisition, a small white teapot as well, with G.R.I. emblazoned on the side. That teapot now adorns a shelf in my kitchen in Australia—yes, I did replace it!

The Indians made us some glasses out of beer bottles, cups being 4/6 each at the bazaar in Asshar, not by the Australian bush method of making jam jars by dipping a piece of string into kerosene, tying it round the bottle, and igniting it. The Indians simply held the bottle between their bare feet while they squatted on the ground and applied friction by pulling alternate ends of a piece of string, turning the bottle round until the glass separated with a blunt edge.

One soon grasped the futility of expecting to find an orthodox article, and one's brain automatically sought the ersatz for almost everything required. It was decided to form a Physiotherapy Department for the treatment of joint pains. Right! The Army had omitted to supply any equipment, but why worry about that? A few petrol tins cajoled from the Armenian at the N.A.A.F.I. canteen, flex "won" by Sarge, and some powerful lamps donated by an R.A.F. engineer with a "bad back," soon became radiant heat apparatus. A machine for the supply of faradic and galvanic electricity was almost completed before I left. Leg baths, arm baths—we had great fun with the petrol tins, a soldering-iron and a pair of tinsnips.

Winter gave to spring, which meant that the weather became warmer, mud became sand, and sandstorms more frequent. The old Tigris, swollen by the melting of the snows on the Persian mountains, overflowed his banks and turned all the desert to the east of the built-up main road into a shallow sea, whereon bumped empty tins and withered palm fronds. It only needed the Ark. . . .

One day a flower came out near our mess-tent. It was an iris. I was so pleased to see it that I photographed it, which was just as well, for the very next day it was eaten by a goat. Still, we had the memories of flowers in the spring!

Now the great difference between spring and summer in Southern Iraq is that in summer there are hot sandstorms and in spring the sandstorms are cold. The velocity and tenacity of the sand do not vary, only the temperature. The colour and lushness of the vegetation undergo no seasonal variation, because there is no vegetation, and no rain either, except in winter.

In case a sandstorm blew up during the day, one had to be very careful about closing one's tent before departing for work in the morning. That is to say, window curtains had to be tied down and door flaps laced accurately at the top. Office tent was four miles from home tent, and one looked forward on return to a nice quiet "sit" in a restful spot.

There was always a certain amount of excitement about driving through a sandstorm on the front of a truck with no windscreen. George, the Indian driver, started up the engine, threw in the clutch, and shut his eyes, and on we'd go until a grinding noise beneath caused him to pull up and scrape off the sump one of the many oil drums used as silent cops.

"Come on, George, sedar!" and he "sedar-ed" (drove straight on) across the railway line, applying his Oriental fatalism to the question of whether or not a train might be approaching the level crossing. He could not hear above the roar of the storm. He could not see three feet ahead for the blinding powder which seemed to be substituted for air.

The nice restful tent one had longed for during the drive was leaning at an angle of some twenty degrees. The blue cotton floor-mats (joost one dinar each, Memsahib) looked like a ploughed paddock. They were the same colour and furrowed like it. The once multi-coloured chintz bedspread was now uniform khaki—blue poppies quite concealed. Everything was khaki-tinted—the gramophone, clock, brush and comb on the packing case moderne which was the dressing table. Khaki uniform and coat hanging in the corner were more khaki-ish than usual. One thought enviously of the comfort in wardrobes provided by Melbourne's furnishing companies, as blared nightly over the radio at home.

The koala on the tent pole emitted clouds of dust when patted. The only objects not coated with dirty dust were the pictures safety-pinned to the swaying walls, simply because they did not keep still long enough for a high-speed dust devil to park. Old Collins Street, with its trees and spires, looked as dignified as ever in a slightly tipsy fashion. "It's a bore, but we can take it!" look. The typewriter shared in the colour scheme, but wheezed along bravely. One did not dare ever to oil it, or chains would have had to be put on the ribbon wheels to drag them out of the mud!

Outside, through a hole in the tent, one could see what appeared to be some sort of super bat flying past —but it was only an Iraqi in a long cloak which billowed out as his feet flew under him. Luckily, he did not have to go against the wind! The noise was incredible. For hours on end those sandstorms continued. But the old gramophone could still grind out "Australia will be there!"

Our mess kitchen was a tent presided over by one Sousa, a Goanese, and an excellent cook, when the arak was not in him. When it was, I lent a hand with dinner and reflected that in Sousa's place I would never be sober, as in addition to the normal heat of the desert he had to cope with that of two large oil stoves.

One day, after a blood pressure raising interview with the Commanding Officer on the subject of the dirt

inside the tent, Sousa came and besought me to take him with me to Australia after the war.

"I work for one Sahib, one Mem-sahib. I like that. I like Australia. Here I work for twenty-six Sahibs, one Mem-sahib. Too much work, Burra Colonel him say 'dust.' Of course 'dust'."

Poor old Sousa! I comforted him with a ration cigarette, but we were all sorry when his threat to leave us actually did come off. No one else could work such miracles with the rations.

Sousa's assistant, a Malayan named Daniel "in the lion's den," lurked behind a screened-off corner of the kitchen tent. Apart from washing up, his main function appeared to be that of potato-peeler—when we could get potatoes! His modus operandi nearly, but not quite, put me off vegetables for life. Squatting beside a tub of muddy water, in which floated dozens of little marbles, he scratched off the skin with his long, dusky finger-nails!

But if our ideas on housekeeping differed, Daniel and I had one firm link between us. We both had close relatives in Singapore. After dinner, when the B.B.C. news came through, I preferred to listen outside, rather than inside, the mess tent, and old Daniel would crouch beside me, tears for his children rolling down his yellow face, as we listened to the story of how our troops were being driven back, and back, and back, through Johore, to their final surrender in Singapore

Those brave Scotties, whom I had watched swinging out of barracks in England, some eighteen months before. Our own Australian Eighth Division — oh maleesh, Daniel! Life must go on.

In time, my tent was made exceedingly comfortable by the Sappers—concrete floor, electric light, wardrobe and dressing table, even a power-point on one pole for an iron! And—a very great military secret—a fan! Also a table for the gramophone, almost the only source of music in the camp. A great favourite these early summer days was Greig's Peer Gynt suite —it made one think of snow-covered pine forests. Later, the Red Cross provided wireless sets for the wards and messes.

The koala bear clinging to the tent pole and a few bush pictures hung around made Major Mem-sahib's tent a bit of Australia away from home, and a rendezvous for stray Aussies around the desert—only strays, because the A.I.F. did not get to Mespot., this war. Two ex-Diggers who had joined the Indian Army after the first world war and had risen to the command of their units—occasional members of the R.A.A.F. attached to the R.A.F., and never least, our ten Australian sisters who, with many others, had been in England in September, 1939, and had joined the Queen Alexandra Imperial Military Nursing Service. All rank was dropped in my tent: we were all good cobbers, we danced on the concrete and we sang Aussie songs.

Around us were many units, many of them Indian. That part of the world has always traded with India. As far back as 3500 B.C., so Sir Leonard Woolley determined from his excavations, the Sumerians had obtained lapis lazuli for their ornaments from the Pamir mountains north-west of India, and under the layer of sand deposited by the Great Flood, he had found two beads of amazonite, a green stone for which the nearest known source was Central India or the mountains beyond Lake Baikal. So he concluded that even before the Flood men had sent caravans across a thousand miles of mountain and desert from the Mesopotamian valley into the heart of India.

As well as fighting men, India provided the various camps with drivers and servants. Our sisters were accommodated two to a tent. If the spirit of Florence Nightingale were to peep into one of them, she would be surprised to see, not the "nurse" of the Crimea, but a beautifully manicured and coiffured damsel reclining on a camp bed, surrounded by silken draperies, smoking Egyptian cigarettes, while a silent khaki figure, complete with turban, flitted in and out bringing cans of hot water. Miss Nightingale would probably think she had strayed out of bounds into a Mohammedan's Paradise!

The ladies of the Q.A.I.M.N.S. worked hard when on duty, trying to keep their patients cool and clean in

dusty tents. But off duty they knew how to relax, assembling in one another's tents for a smoke and a spot and a gossip, and becoming girls again, after being female soldiers for some eight hours a day. Most of them had special boy-friends, whom they changed around fairly frequently. A great interest in all the love affairs was taken by the Matron. characteristically outspoken in her criticism when she thought necessary. "One of those nasty, loud, yelping devils!" was how she damned the latest heart stimulant of our chief glamour girl.

I grew very fond of some of the sisters of the Indian Army Nursing Service. Anglo-Indians they were, as pure-blooded Indian women do not nurse men. They wore white uniforms with navy belts and epaulettes, but off duty sometimes slipped into saris and brightened the landscape when they took an evening walk.

The opening of our British hospital had made a great difference to the social life of the desert. Dances were arranged, both in the Sisters' Messes and in those of outside units. On an average possibly of once a month, most of the officers would take a sister to dine at the Shatt el Arab Hotel, where, for a number of fils equivalent to 2/6, one could obtain a hot bath! We really became like children in our eagerness to turn on hot water taps and pull chains! After the canvas or zinc tub in one's tent and the "thunderbox" into which one was bowed by the Iraqi attendant (a dignified person wearing someone's cast-off suit and black forage cap), the porcelain mod. cons. of the hotel were a terrific contrast—and arm-chairs instead of deck-chairs! Plane passengers, desiring sleep rather than gaiety, were wont to inquire if the Army at Basrah ever did any work. They did, but they played, too!

CHAPTER XIX.

NEAR our camp at that time was a Russian unit, with two girls as interpreters. Thinking they might be as tired of male society as I was, and having a hazy idea that Russians ranked second only to Australians as tea drinkers, I asked one of them if she and her friend would care to come to my tent one evening to meet some of the sisters. She gaped at me as though I had suggested proposing a separate peace. "After the war," she said politely, "we shall enjoy to take tea with you. But now we are too busy. Always we work all day; sometimes we work all night. When the war is won there will be plenty of time for parties!"

No wonder they are doing so well, I thought, if that is their attitude. I was far too dashed to think up the obvious answer—that a living idler is more use to his country than a dead worker!

Everyone in the desert seemed anxious to do things for us. The "Old Man" just about gave birth to a tombstone with his name on it, when he woke up to the methods by which jobs actually were being put into commission—jobs he had been trying for months to get done through official channels.

"Who does this sort of work?"

"Oh, Janet's boy friend is O.C. that! You had better see her about it."

Peter the Padre stigmatised all women as natural born gold-diggers, but did not say "No" to toast instead of bread for breakfast, when electrical appliances suddenly came to light.

The Officer in Charge of one engineering unit, who between world wars had been a fashionable London dressmaker, draped my leaking X-ray tube with a sheet of lead rubber as tenderly as though he were draping one of his models with a new creation. . . .

With one Ted, who commanded an R.A.S.C. unit, I went one night on a salvaging expedition around the desert. In a 15-cwt. truck we scoured the moonlit waste, in search of any object that would cast a shadow. There was no danger of losing the road,

because there was no road to lose—just desert. All of us were gradually becoming proficient in an ancient art of the Chaldeans—that of steering by the stars. It was not so far away from our camp that the Wise Men of the East had set forth to follow the Star to Bethlehem.

On the horizon rose a tall minaret-like structure, which was old Sindibad's tower. Ever so often my eye would be caught by a shadow on the salt white sand, and Ted swung the truck as I indicated the position of the find. We returned triumphantly to camp the richer by two coils of fencing wire, a piece of wire netting, lots of rope, nine petrol tins, two bricks (for book-ends), and, by a great stroke of luck, a thing which contained the tungsten points required for my new electricity machine. All dropped off trucks and blown for miles by the fierce winds.

I should just love to see Ted's ancestral home in England. It must be a perfect museum of things which might come in handy some day. I am sure he never threw anything away in his life, and if his forbears were all like him . . . well!

Ted's henchmen made, to my design, a Coolgardie safe to keep the drinks cool, and it was such a success that he had orders for twenty-six more within the week. There was certainly no lack of draught to accelerate evaporation from its hessian sides! It was great to be able to drink cool instead of tepid water, not to mention beer!

Five thousand years ago the predecessors of the Iraqis made bricks out of clay and straw from the grain so plentiful then, and fashions in brick making do not seem to have changed much. One evening I wandered over to watch the process, and was welcomed by the Iraqi foreman. He handed me a strong cigarette, with which I coped in the interests of international amity. Heaps of mud there were, which was clay mixed with donkey and camel dung, the foreman told me, and beside each heap squatted two workmen, whose team work was admirable. One man's job was to knead a dollop of mud and to hand it to his mate, who patted it into a box the size and shape of a brick,

with a small piece of wood nailed to the bottom, to provide a dint in the brick for an airspace—highly technical! The filled box was held between the feet of the expert, who levelled off the mud with a strip of rag (probably acquired from his gown, by the look of it), then clapped on a lid, and the brick was turned out. Dried in the sun, these bricks formed a considerable portion of our new buildings springing up all round. However, where much weight-bearing was required, they had to be baked in kilns. A kiln-dried brick, besides being strong enough to endure through the centuries, was a really beautiful article, in which cream, rose, and canary yellow blended to give the finished building a colourful and happy appearance.

A great treat we had one night—an E.N.S.A. show, with Alice Delysia, came to the desert. A concert platform had been erected in an aeroplane hangar, which was packed full at both performances. Somebody had degutted the local grand piano, but there were still enough strings left for the production of some really hot rhythm—after all, the main desideratum of modern music.

After the show, Base Sub-area turned on a party. All the performers, of course, were present, and the available sisters in gay frocks, with American officers in navy mess tunics. A real pipe band! No doubt about the colonising flair of the English, I thought. Their modus vivendi goes on imperturbably in the wilderness just as at home. A people who could make a golf course at Aden, with browns (oil poured on sand) instead of greens!

I danced with a pukka sahib of extreme dignity, known to the vulgar, from the nature of the work done by the unit he commanded, as "Dan, Dan, the Lavatory Man."

Our hospital possessed the only portable X-ray machine in the desert, and we had great sport running it around in a truck to the various Indian hospitals and erecting it beside the bed of some unfortunate with a broken leg, for instance. To "earth" the machine, we passed a wire out a window to a piece of piping which was driven deep into the sand. Then

an Indian poured water down the pipe just before the exposure was made.

An American unit had just come to Basrah, that whirlpool of nationalities, and the lounge of the hotel came to assume the set-up of a wild west movie. After months of monotonous khaki, the mufti with which our Allies sometimes covered themselves certainly provided gay relief. And one soldier affected a shirt of the bright Buchanan tartan over rust-coloured trousers, and topped himself with a Boy Scout hat adorned by a silver cabuchon, the inevitable gat on hip. And could their chief rhumba? Oh, boy!

Outside my office tent the Iraqis were digging a well. Down the deep pit stood a workman shovelling clay into a basket. A rope passed from the basket over a pulley on a frame up top. On the other end of the rope was a donkey, which hauled up basket after basket. I often wondered if the theory of the transmigration of souls into the bodies of animals had originated in the mind of some humanitarian propagandist, distressed as I was at the cruelty of man to his beast of burden so prevalent in the East. One had only to watch the difference in treatment of cattle in India and in Egypt to realise the practical result of religious beliefs.

Before summer blazed in May there were all sorts of unusual ways of filling in the evenings, after work and before dinner. For instance, one could hike across to the next camp and watch the camels being bedded down for the night. The Camel Corps did a great job in the transport line, and all sorts of goods were carried from one camp to another in lorries, in which the camels condescended to be harnessed and driven by Indians. At bed-time about a dozen animals were stood in a circle, with their heads towards one another. Much groaning and snarling. Gradually, and with infinite patience, the little Indian drivers persuaded them to kneel down, and covered each one with a rug. And there they slept, radiating outwards like the petals of some gigantic malodorous daisy.

Learning to shoot at a near-by range was also great sport. Lying flat on one's tummy, being battered in

the shoulder by the stock of the gun, and trying to remember everything at once! The Scottish instructor reminded me, by his restraint, of a pro. in New Zealand, who had done his best to teach me the national game. "Yon's one of the best putters in the country, lass, if ye could only use it."

I much preferred the revolver to the rifle, so much lighter and more dignified.

A Bedouin caravan passed one day — black-robed women, laughing, shy children in long gowns, who thought it a great joke to take the backsheesh and then run off before they could be photographed. Bearded men in long brown cloaks. Camels, donkeys, sheep and goats. So from a few miles north, up at Ur, had Abraham set out. The clock might have been put back thousands of years.

"And Terah took Abram his son, and Lot the son of Haran, his son's son, and Sarai his daughter-in-law, his son Abram's wife, and they went forth with them from Ur of the Chaldees to go into the land of Canaan. . . ." Across this very desert!

The philosophy of old Omar Khayyam seemed to be in the very atmosphere. I thought how well—

> "Come fill the Cup, and in the Fire of Spring
> The Winter Garment of Repentance fling.
> The Bird of Time has but a little way
> To fly, and Lo! the Bird is on the Wing!"

fitted in with the possibility that the day might come when we would be blitzed out of our camps, or when we might have to work so hard that we would be too tired to play. In the meantime, we played almost as hard as we worked—some of us!

One Sunday morning I had everything organised for a sleep-in after a late night, the first—sleep in, not late night—for several weeks. The batman was persuaded to omit the 6 o'clock cup of morning tea, strong and sickly sweet as beloved of Tommies, and the mess orderly cajoled into bringing breakfast in bed at 9.

"Are you within, Madam?" and my staff work was all upset by a gentle Irish voice floating through the tent flap sharp at 7.00 hours. "The Royal Engineers

are here. Will you be coming forth and signing the plan for your new quarters which I have in my hand?"

"I will not. You know perfectly well I've been out dancing half the night, because it's your chief I was dancing with. Will you go away, you little devil?"

"Sure, now, Madam, it's meself that's been up since five of the clock, and I'm having satisfaction by getting up as many other people as possible. If you are not coming out I'm bringing the blue print right in to you. And you'll be wise to select the site yourself at this minute."

So there was nothing else for it. Anyhow, it was mighty hard to sleep in with sergeants bellowing their charges off to Church Parade, camels moaning, and Arabs "singing" while they worked. So the site was selected—on the edge of the camp, overlooking acres of nothing, a nothing, however, which was sometimes broken by a beautiful mirage with date palms and blue water. We often tried to photograph that mirage, thinking perhaps lenses and so on might have improved since Lawrence pronounced it impossible. But Lawrence was right!

Everyone around seemed to be interested in the plan for my "house." Consensus of opinion was that my bedroom should be large enough only to hold the camp bed, wardrobe and dressing table, so the rest of the space could be devoted to the sitting-room. My tent, it was considered, was altogether too small to accommodate all the people who wanted to hold parties in it.

Next day, believe it or not of our Army, the building was put in hand. Gangs of Arab workmen arrived. Each wore a long loose gown of the fashionable off-white, held together by faith and a narrow girdle, someone's old coat or a Bedouin brown cloak, and a head-dress of black and white check. No shoes. They fell on the selected piece of desert like a herd of locusts on a lawn or schoolboys on a party table, cloaks and shovels flew in all directions, so did conversation, and they were soon down well below ground level. Every so often a workman detached himself from the group

to say his prayers, which he did with much enthusiastic bowing of his body.

There did not seem room for anything else in the melée, but laws of Nature mean no more than any other laws to the Iraqis, and they managed to squeeze into the excavation an incredible number of donkeys, laden with sacks into which the sand was shovelled. Then the game little beasts staggered up with the help of sticks and curses.

So the foundations of the Temple of Solomon might have been laid, or of Babylon the Gate of God.

Bricklaying came next, the material being brought to the site by brown, white, and black donkeys, and tipped into a heap. From this heap five, no more and no less, bricks were carried at a time by certain workmen to the bricklayers. The Arabs through the ages have developed team work to a remarkable extent. The job of certain others was to carry on their heads basins of water for mixing the mortar. When the wind blew most of the water over them—maleesh! go back and fill up again!

Building was going on all round. It was hoped to have all the patients housed in brick underground wards, instead of tents, before the summer gained its full furnace-glow. The Sisters' Mess was nearly completed, and a swimming pool under weigh. A great corroboree celebrated the finishing of any building, the Arabs dancing round in a large circle, singing and bashing petrol tins, with robes and kaffiyehs flying all ways in the wind. That singing—like a curlew in pain!

The institution of airgraphs brought the Tommies news from home in nine days—news of cool, green England, and of children whom they had never seen. Ours had been a peace-time hospital in Palestine: many of the orderlies had left England five years before, and most of our officers had come straight from Dunkirk to the East. It meant so much to them, in their anxiety about their people, to have news in nine days instead of the nine weeks often taken by sea mail.

I found the Tommy an inarticulate chap. He expresses his love of country, his determination to do everything he can to help win the war, not in words, but in a dogged resistance to temptation to moan. That is why I think there will be no bloody revolution in England after the war. The Tommy has faith, faith in what he knows and what his fathers knew. He does not chase rainbows. If a windfall comes along, such as an unexpected trip in the weekly Passion Wagon to Basrah, he accepts gladly: if the Sergeant-major spoils it by nabbing him for a fatigue, it is too bad, but he can go another time. Only small things, but character is made up of small things.

Of course in every unit there are the odd ones who do moan, they are called "Bolshies" and tolerated good-humouredly—up to a point! The Tommy is really exercising his courage and endurance all the time, not only in moments of heroic effort.

CHAPTER XX

ONE day we were visited by Great Ones from Cairo, who inspected the hospital and then proceeded to the brick picture theatre to lecture to the officers. We were all cattishly delighted that our old desert was running true to form; it would have been too lamentable if they had happened to strike one of our odd "nice" days! Certainly, the General and his staff drove in closed cars, and not in the open trucks we patronised, but they got a fair idea of desert conditions even so, for a sandstorm "darkened the world" and the voice of the lecturer could hardly be heard above the scream of the wind in the picture house roof, which threatened to come off on top of the audience. Some months later, I believe, it actually was blown off, and the picture house converted into an open-air one overnight!

The heat became almost intolerable. Of course, nothing is quite intolerable! Patients lay limp and motionless on their beds. The muscular effort required by chattering became too great even for me, and meals in the mess were silent affairs. Everyone slept like dogs or exhausted children for a couple of hours after lunch. Outside the tents throughout the day, the sun hit one's face like stinging metal. Oh, for a kaffiyeh!

In the X-ray Department the supply of ice was being constantly renewed in an endeavour to keep the developer cool, so that the emulsion—and the pictures —would not slither off the film. Joyfully I remembered that I had almost wheedled a promise of one of the few air-conditioning plants in the country for our new department, which was gradually growing higher in its pit, with the Sappers kindly incorporating the modern advantages of every department I had ever worked in.

Then came a rumour that I was to be transferred to Eighth Army. People kept dropping in from outlying areas to say "Good-bye." After a week of this, official orders came through confirming the rumour, and stating that I would catch the train for Baghdad in six hours! As if a girl could arrange the transfer

of work, farewell a desert full of cobbers, and pack, all in six hours. Our Army has just no imagination, but it is sometimes amenable to therapy. I managed to gain twenty-four hours' grace, and that night a party took place in and around my tent.

A Wing Commander sat on the upturned zinc tub with our Glamour Girl. Two colonels and four sisters shared the camp-bed. Everyone else who could get in sat on the floor. A Pole and a Czech who were members of our mess—an R.A.A.F. officer and a sergeant-pilot, a Tommy who was also an Australian. All the sisters off duty, at least one representative of each of the surrounding British units. Beer and tea. The gramophone blared, and we danced under the stars among the medley of staff cars and trucks parked outside. A passer-by asked brightly if they were holding vehicle inspections at night now! I felt quite sentimental about the genuine friendliness of the English after many months' close acquaintance; but I hated the thought of having to start all over again with strangers in Egypt! It was a grand party.

Next day, my good friends Peter the Padre, Sarge and Joe, my batman and several sisters packed up what I consider the bare necessities for a home in the desert. I really did feel sad at the dismantling of that tent—it had been such a comfortable spot and all ranks had had such good fun there. Later the site was occupied ironically by a brick ward for brigadiers.

In the evening, my compatriot, Arthur, an air force officer, brought his truck and drove me to the railway siding. A Digger was Arthur, who had left Australia with the first contingent and had gone through Libya, Greece and Crete before joining the R.A.F. The sort of chap one would like to have close handy in a tough spot.

We found the siding crowded with the baggage of yabbering Iraqis. I often wondered if it was sandstorms that blew their gowns to ribbons, or the ravages of poverty. The poor Iraqi is poor indeed! The British Government thought he ought to have a Parliament, and wished one on to him. But it is very remote. He is instructed how to vote by his village

headman, instead of by the party newspaper as in Australia. Some day the desert of southern Iraq may again be made to bear grain as in the days of the Persians. But to see fields of waving corn replacing this desolation calls for a great strain on the imagination.

The train puffed in on the narrow line, the siding cleared rapidly of the Faithful and their kit, I said a fond farewell to my Sandgroper cobber, and was soon asleep in a comfortable bunk, in spite of an assertion from the next compartment that some young man was all in favour of stuff going to Russia instead of Singapore. . . . .

I awoke to green crops beside the railway line, irrigation canals, date palms, sheep and goats tended by Arabs in bright orange cloaks—a welcome change from the drabness of the desert. We passed a mud-walled village with its little mud mosque. The train stopped at a tiny station with a large name—Ishkandarieh—where flourished the white cedar and the blue kingfisher.

More desert—and then Baghdad, the City of Peace. The smell would suggest a different spelling of the last word of that title! Mafeesh glamour. Romance finished too. Very like Old Basrah it was, which, by the way, is only about two hundred years old. Narrow streets with overhanging balconies, bazaars selling the usual cheap junk at high prices. The wooden doorways the most interesting thing about the houses—from the outside, that is!

I had great hopes of the Museum, where Gertrude Bell had worked so hard in the assembling and cataloguing of antiquities. Alas! the Army kept me dithering around till midday, when the Museum closed, as it was Saturday. The one bright spot that my disillusioned eye lighted on was George, the Indian driver, by whose side I had made so many journeys from the mess to the hospital, across those four miles of desert. His shout "Major Mem-sahib!" saved me a taxi and his teeth brightened the brown face in a constant grin as I climbed up and sat beside him again.

I had read much about Baghdad in the really good Iraqian library at Asshar—where there was one case of books in English! Of how it was founded in the eighth century by an Abbasid caliph, out of bricks from the ruins of Ctesiphon and Seleucia. Of how a century later the good Haroun al Raschid built his palace with the dome of pure gold, and extended the city to the other bank of the Tigris. And a gorgeous tomb he made for his favourite wife, Zobeide. Gone, with the glory of Baghdad. . . . .

Possibly inside one of the mosques it might have been possible to recapture one's childhood thrill of the Arabian nights, but the Shiah sect of the Moslems, whose stronghold it is, do not permit their mosque to be profaned by the feet of unbelievers. The only mosque I ever entered was that of Mahomed Ali Pasha in Cairo, with its huge alabaster columns and Persian carpets and gallery for the ladies, when they pray.

In the Baghdad of 1942, all that remains of the greatness of Haroun al Raschid is his name above a picture theatre. Perhaps, after all, the modern equivalent of the "stately pleasure dome" of Kubla Khan!

At 4 p.m. I was checked yet again by the Army and ushered into the Nairn Bus for Damascus, together with several senior officers and an A.T.S. lass. I was delighted to notice that one of these gentlemen wore the plain purple ribbon of the Victoria Cross with the badges of the R.A.M.C. As a temporary member of the Corps I felt a vicarious pride. I sidled up to him and tried to discover how he had earned it, but naturally my curiosity is still unsatisfied!

So I gave a little attention to the bus. The story of the Brothers Nairn is well known—how these two Anzacs remained in Syria after the last war and started a taxi service across eight hundred odd miles of desert from Damascus to Baghdad. The Pullman car was the last word in comfort, and being Kiwis, they had naturally adapted some of the ideas of their progressive little country. The arm-chair seats, just a convenient height from the ground, could be let back for sleeping, just like those of the Dunedin-Christchurch railway. The Pullman was hauled by a tractor

driven by an Arab, whose companion dozed beside him until his turn came to take over.

We stopped at Abou al Chamat, a little fort where a sentry walked the roof, for all the world like a P. C. Wren movie. The passengers trailed out to stretch their legs, and the driver boiled the kettle on the primus. Almost like a tourist trip in Victoria, where the billy is boiled over a wood fire and the tea tanged with eucalyptus smoke.

Then back to the bus, where seats were let down and everyone settled to sleep. I was surprised to find that the three senior officers snored as loudly as did my Tommies, back at the old first-aid post in England. Somehow one does not expect a pukka sahib to unbend sufficiently to snore, at any rate, not the very first time one sleeps beside him!

Between two and three we were awakened by the cessation of noise from the engine. Here, in the midst of starlit nowhere, was a cafe. We rubbed our eyes, staggered to the white-clothed tables, and drank good tea.

I was greatly taken with the little teapot handed to me. It was a good pourer, always the first qualification for a teapot, but its great charm to my souvenir-hunting tourist mind lay in the colourful image it bore of the late King Ghazi I of Iraq. Smart in khaki with a Sam Browne, no less, His Majesty wore a green topee with a tailboard covering his trapezius muscles. Also a worried and melancholy expression, no doubt justified. On each side of the portrait was the national flag of Iraq, with its black, white and green bands and orange triangle with two stars. Altogether a broth of a teapot. The sight of that flag reminded me of a "bad show, old boy!" at Asshar one night, when at the Kit-Kat Cabaret the band struck up the Iraqi National Anthem and everyone went on dancing because the "tune" was unrecognised.

I offered the Arab waiter a hundred and fifty fils (3/-) for the souvenir, which he washed out and returned to me. But just as we had all snuggled down again and the engine was starting, the boss of the café appeared at the bus door in a great flap. He had

been robbed. One hundred and fifty fils was not nearly enough for that priceless jewel of a teapot! At least one-half dinar! He flapped his arms and his eyeballs and talked police.

"If you don't clear out," drawled our Brigadier, "I'll cut your throat."

The Brig. was presumably addressing the Arab, but he was looking straight at me, the cause of the trouble! I felt most relieved when he fell asleep.

We awoke to spring in Syria, a very different matter from summer in Southern Iraq. Crops, flowers, green pasture land. Damascus, "The Pillar of the East" flashed into sight, its mosques and minarets silhouetted against the Mountains of Lebanon. The greenery around it was delightful—this part of Syria appeared to abound in rivers and wells.

Damascus is one of the oldest cities of the world, so old, that it even got a mention in Genesis, as the home of Abraham's steward. One has to feel the history of such a city to realise the peace of our cities in Australia—up to 1943! Conquered by David, Damascus was lost by Solomon. Conquered by Alexander the Great, and made a Roman province. Conquered by the Turks, it was once the capital of the Mahommedan empire. "And a torrent of Christian blood flowed down the streets of Damascus." The headquarters of Saladin the Saracen, who was buried there. And Saul was converted to Christianity—in Damascus!

Of all the historic associations of this ancient city, however, there is one of particular interest to Australians. The first A.I.F. under Sir Harry Chauvel marched into Damascus at the termination of the war against Turkey.

The Nairn bus decanted its passengers about 11 a.m. —just twenty hours to cover that enormous distance!

In the bazaar I watched some fine filigree work being done by Armenians, swarthy, but blue-eyed. The "Street called Straight" of the Gospels is now a market, the Souk Midhat Pasha, and it connects two of the city gates—the Bab Sharqi and the Bab Jabieh.

From Damascus we drove through the green hills of Syria and Northern Palestine to Haifa. Summer

was just commencing here, and the sunshine was something to enjoy, not to endure as in Southern Iraq. A few wild hollyocks, the last of the spring flowers, were still nodding on the lower slopes.

At Haifa I "Felt like one who treads alone
Some banquet hall deserted"

as I strolled along the familiar streets to our favourite cafe and found there no one I knew. Even the waiters had been changed. The little green tables were occupied by a few sisters, some A.T.S. girls, and officers of units new to Palestine. I sighed and ordered a cup of coffee for old times' sake.

I suppose it is the isolation of small communities in a vast territory that has bred this gregariousness in my countrymen. An Englishman develops a certain aloofness which protects him from any inquisitiveness and impertinence on the part of the crowd perpetually jostling him. Hence, I think, the loneliness of London. He has no objection to "being alone" for quite protracted periods—often prefers it, as Peter the Padre used to remark drily when I urged to be taken on his country trips in the Baby Austin.

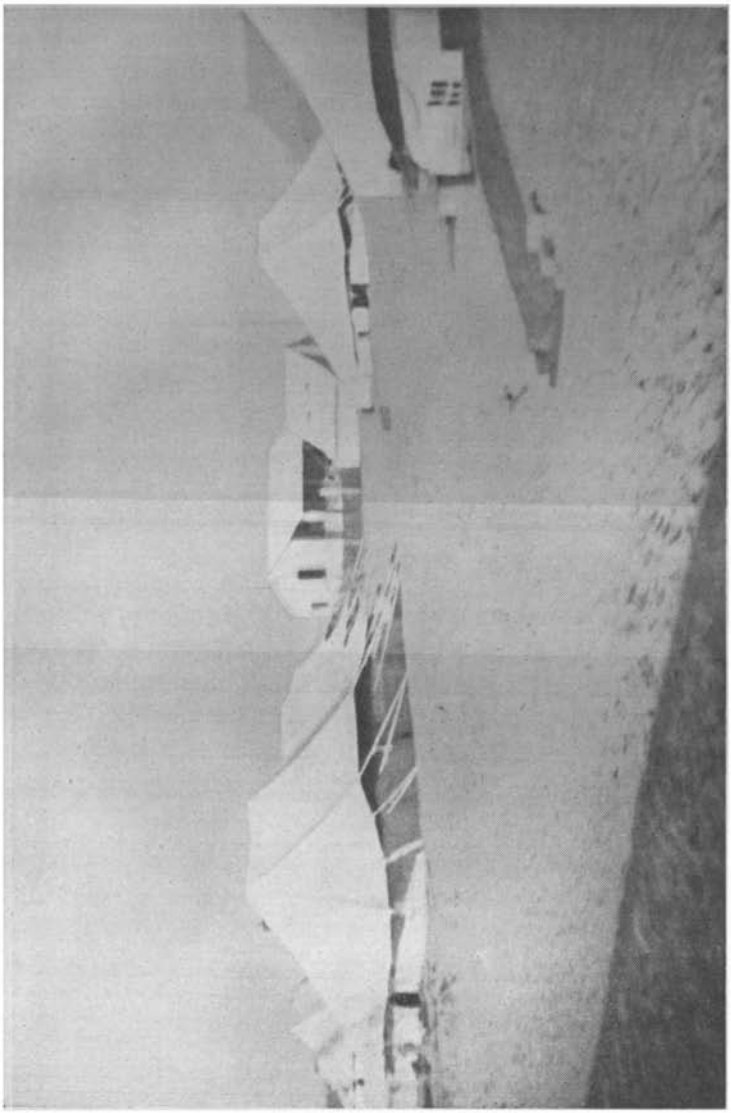
"Did you know that fellow?" he asked one day, in this very cafe, when he returned after a few minutes' absence to find me yarning happily with a compatriot.

"I know him now," I said. "I couldn't see the boy sitting all alone without saying 'hallo' to him, could I?"

"Extraordinary!" murmured Peter.

At the Hotel I soon forgot about being desolate, for I found there the Commanding Officer of the hospital adjacent to our old camp in Southern Palestine. He invited me to share a table with him and two of his nursing sisters—gay lassies frae Scotland with whom I had often had a swim at the Jaffa Club. What dears most Commanding Officers are off duty, I thought. Unfortunately, most of those I had met usually found other means of occupying their spare time than by spending it in my company!

Early next morning I settled into a comfortable seat in the Egyptian train—in which I was beginning to feel almost a shareholder! Late at night I crossed the



A BRITISH GENERAL HOSPITAL IN THE CANAL AREA.

AN AUSTRALIAN SISTER SERVING IN THE TERRITORIAL ARMY NURSING SERVICE.

Suez Canal, and the Digger who transferred my luggage to the ferry, gave me a piece of sound advice.

"Go straight to the Y, sister—don't fool about with those hotels."

What a difference to my previous arrival in Cairo—when I had with difficulty found transport to the hotel and with even greater difficulty obtained a bed. Now, in a luxurious house I discovered the most comfortable spot since leaving home—the Y.W.C.A. Hostel on the Kasr el Nil. Spacious rooms, comfortable chairs, flowers, good food well served, first-class showers that always worked, baths—and wide beds! The British Government had asked the Y.W.C.A. to take over the establishment of these hostels throughout the Middle East, for the accommodation of servicewomen and their friends. They were flourishing in most of the cities of Egypt and Palestine. Not all were residential, but all provided the usual facilities of a good woman's club, under the direction of Miss Jean Begg, whom I had last seen in Dunedin, at the Otago Women's Club. Miss Begg was considering opening a hostel at Basrah, and I thought what a godsend it would be to our sisters, hot, dusty and weary, in from the desert.

The house itself was, I am sure, inspired by the Arabian Nights. Built of brick, the facade showed horizontal stripes of alternating red and buff. I was always fascinated by the doors of the Arabs. The main one here was of heavy wood, but its surface was covered by tracery of brass. Inside was a large hall, remarkable mainly for its ceiling. This was of wood carved in the usual conventional Arabic design—but with many eight-pointed stars. Around the windows were frames of plaster lattice work, and stained glass in the windows themselves. A famous Coptic woodcarver had made a lofty screen, or mashrabiya, protecting the upper gallery. Altogether, it was a perfect dream of an oriental palace!

CHAPTER XXI

HEADQUARTERS sent me back to the Canal Area, to join a hospital unit recently arrived from England. I was met at the little railway station by a truck, out of which jumped the officer whom I was to replace and who was to "proceed to Iraq." A big New Zealander who had fought in the last war. He was accompanied by two nursing sisters, one his cousin (an Australian!), and the other a cheery companion of many hikes round Hampshire and Surrey. I was so delighted with my welcome: it augured well for the kindness and hospitality for which I shall always remember that hospital.

My tent was inside the Sisters' Enclosure, a high fence formed of reeds wired together. The unit had arrived so recently that living amenities were few, compared with what I had been used to out in the blue! None the less, the colonising urge of the English was well to the fore in the little gardens outlined by stones in front of the tents. Marigolds were blooming in the sand. The tents were floored with cement tiles, and electric light had been installed. But this was a hospital area only, so there was no Sapper unit camped nearby to make wardrobes and dressing tables and Coolgardie safes for the girls. I managed to scrabble up some nails and borrowed the large packing case in which the x-ray machine was transported. Secure in the luxury of a tent "to myself" I soon settled down in comfort.

I often thought how, of all the hardships which nurses on active service are called upon to endure, the most trying must surely be the lack of privacy enforced by the sharing of tents. Four women, not necessarily friends or those of similar class or tastes, bundled together in a tent the size of an average kitchen. Here their clothes hung on ropes suspended among the camp beds. The girls all made the best of it and never a moan did I hear.

I stood at the door of my new home, looked out over the sand, and blinked. I was accustomed to mirages.

but not to moving mirages! Yet surely here was one? I had not experienced this sensation of optical illusion since the day in New Zealand when, disporting himself between the tramlines of St. Clair's main street, I had beheld — a seal! Now across the desert before my bewildered eye there steamed a warship. On one side of it was a truck, and on the other a camel. I blinked again and remembered the Suez Canal; the high bank obscured any sight of the water!

It did seem stupid to be homesick for the blazing wilderness and for my mates of that far-off community. But oh! how I missed the girls I knew so well, the other officers whose little ways I had come to understand, and my boon companions from the outside units! How I missed my Sarge and Joe, who knew just how I wanted the x-ray pictures taken, and who met all my stormings with a sly — "Kettle's on the Primus, Madam!"

My new Commanding Officer was kindness and gentleness personified. After dinner, tables and chairs were placed outside the hot brick mess-room; the shutters had to be closed at dusk, as the blackout was strictly enforced. Outside, our eyes soon became accustomed to the faint glow of the unclouded Egyptian starlight.

"Now don't be running off to your tent, my dear," the C.O. would say, for a great weariness was growing on me and I was coming to regard my camp bed as the most desirable spot on earth. "Stay and join your brother officers at the 'biergarten'."

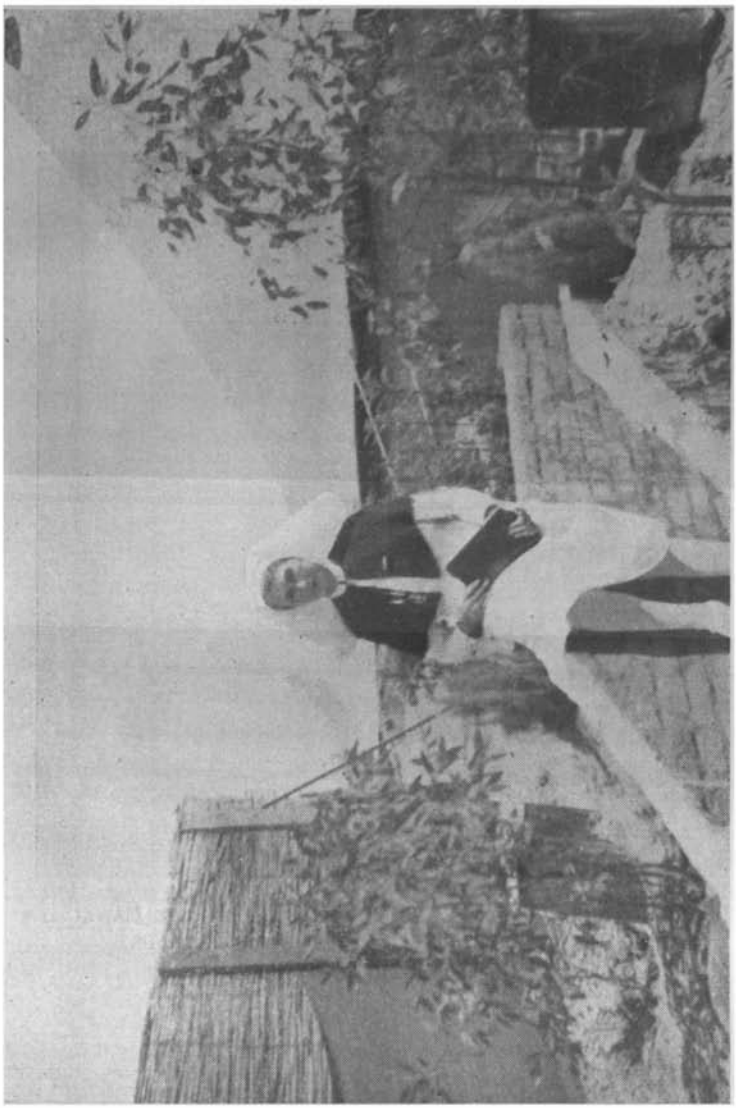
If my brother officers felt any resentment at my presence in that mess, they never gave the slightest sign of it. Their attitude towards me was one of consistent friendliness, on and off duty. There were Welshmen among them, and the singing at those 'biergartens' is one of my happiest memories of the R.A.M.C.

Here in Egypt was civilization right to hand. One could hitch-hike to Cairo and back in twenty-four hours. There was daily transport, by Y.W.C.A. truck, to Ismailia—known familiarly as "Ish." And on the Canal a Lido, no less!

To celebrate his last night in Egypt, my predecessor at this unit, took me to dance at the French Club at Ismailia. We wandered along the wide streets and crescents of this handsome city, which contains the homes of many of the Suez Canal officials. Massive stone dwellings, lawns and shady trees. We passed beneath a row of fern-like gul mohr trees, whose tango-red blossoms were being replaced by enormous seed pods. A Tommy guard cut down one of these for me with his bayonet: I have hopes that some day a patch of grey-green bush in Australia may be lit up by this gift from Egypt.

The French Club was famous for its music and gaiety. Not much sign of war here — if one turned one's back on an untidy ending to a wall next door, where Jerry had dropped a bomb one night. Tables were grouped on the terrace, above well-trimmed lawns and flower beds. Through wide glass doors we entered a lofty room, papered in gold brocade and decorated with the largest gilt mirror I have ever seen— it occupied most of the far wall. Modern paintings, a good dance band, and a splendid floor. French women so chic that their hair resembled lacquer. We danced till midnight, then climbed into that treasure of a truck, provided, like all Y.W.C.A. facilities, for service-women and their friends. Never did I see a service-woman lacking for friends! That three-ton truck was almost the only means of transport in the area — except in connection with sordid matters of duty!

The Lido was a much favoured spot. It was within walking distance of a Convalescent Depot, and many of the patients made a habit of appearing in time for breakfast, spending the day, and returning to their beds before the Night Sister's round! Protected from the road by a high reed fence, the building included a great lounge room furnished with real arm chairs (not canvas ones!) sofas, dining tables, books — and even a good piano. On the wide verandah were more tables where one could sip cool lemonade from green glasses. Tea was on the Australian scale, for the hostess of this Y.W.C.A. Club was a Melbourne girl — incidentally a friend of my young sister. She enter-



MISS M. E. HARRIS, Q.A.I.M.N.S., MATRON OF A BRITISH GENERAL HOSPITAL IN THE CANAL AREA.

THE BENGAL CLUB—THE Y.W.C.A. HOSTEL ON THE CANAL.
THE HOSTESS (CENTRE) IS MISS DORIS NIEBOUR.

tained with quiet charm and efficiency, English and Anglo-Indian sisters, Palestinian Auxiliary Territorial Service girls, and their Navy, Army, and Air-force boy friends of all ranks. Very proud of my countrywoman was I, when one day I overheard her referred to, by one eminently qualified to judge, as "the most popular girl in Egypt!"

Swimming in the Suez Canal was a new experience. There were hurried dashes for the bank when round the bend appeared a warship or mine sweeper. The backwash from the larger vessels produced huge waves on the placid blue surface. No one was allowed to swim after dusk, on account of the possibility of the smuggling of hashish! The Canal Guard patrolled the opposite bank on a camel — silhouetted against the sky, he always reminded me of one of the etchings done on silver by the Amara ware workers of Basrah. He never looked quite real, viewed from this continental Lido.

Among the convalescents who patronised the Club at that time were flying boys from Malta. "Tired of loafing here—can't sleep at night, it's so quiet—how long is this damned plaster to stay on — got a date with a Jerry" — and so on. It was always somebody's job to take the "Cripples" as they called themselves, to the Lido in off-duty time. Flying boys from Malta —just boys! What a privilege to have known them! The veteran of his squadron was not yet 21 — he had a plaster of Paris case on his leg, a sophisticated moustache and the chubby face of a very little boy. But his eyes — ! Is there any hell hot enough to requite these Germans for what they are doing to our youth?

CHAPTER XXII

CASUALTIES began to come down from the Western Desert. Tommies weary after a long train journey, glad to find themselves in hospital beds. And quiet. Plenty of work there was for all, officers, sisters and orderlies co-operating well. No scamping of any duty because we were busy.

I was taking pictures in a surgical ward, with one eye on what was going on around. An airman who had just crashed was being prepared for operation. The Sister was treating him for shock and two orderlies were removing mud from his body. The Matron sailed down the ward and satisfied herself that all was well with him. Then she turned to the Sister and said — "Don't forget to see that his toenails are cut before he goes to the theatre, Sister."

I grinned to myself, and then at myself, as I realised that this attention to detail is what makes for the thoroughness of the English workman's job. Every detail had to receive meticulous attention, because the comfort and quick recovery of each patient depended on the sum of little things.

Orderlies came and wheeled the airman to the theatre, (his subsequent recovery was complete), and the staff turned its attention to the urgent matter of preparing the ward for the Commanding Officer's inspection. Boots, the laces correctly inserted, had to be polished and put down with the toes turned out. Mosquito nets must be adjusted. A very small Tommy was grappling with a very large net. At last he thought he had it right. Sister came along, and said "No, that won't do at all." The Tommy was a bit crestfallen, but he liked Sister, so he took it down and arranged it all over again. Sister approved. But when the C.O. looked at it, he discovered that the bands on the mosquito net were not at the same height as those of the net on the next bed!

Trivial matters in the middle of a war? Perhaps. But think of the patient lying in the bed opposite.

Staring all day at irregular strips of calico and untidy boots. . . .

Week-end leave (24 hours) was granted so that I might "proceed to Cairo to purchase supplies required for the Occupational Therapy Department" which I was supposed to be running in my "spare" time. Cheers! A shopping expedition combined with an opportunity to forgather with New Zealanders . . . .

There was a setback at the railway station. No sign of the daily train. The station master spoke Arabic, the R.T.O. Highland Scots. Straining my interpretative faculties to the utmost, I gathered that the departure time had been advanced by one hour! Maleesh! One had a thumb!

With it I hailed the Arab driver of a N.A.A.F.I. truck. He was all smiles, and indicated the back of the vehicle. I scrambled up among his load, and there made two discoveries—

1. That my batman was human, for here he was toying with a Palestinian A.T.S. girl, a happy grin illuminating his usually stolid face.

2. That one can sit without disaster on a slippery heap of "empties" provided they are packed in a box.

The little Jewish girl approved highly of the Army, and was trying her utmost to learn English. I should like to have heard the result of the grafting of the batman's Lancashire dialect onto the Hebrew-German stock.

The truck reached my turn-off, and I climbed down in search of the next conveyance. This turned out to be a motor cycle, ridden by a Padre. "Hitch-hiking, Sister?" he asked with such a vivid twinkle in his eye that I wondered if he were using the title in a medical, ecclesiastical or colloquial sense.

"I understand there is a piece of paper out forbidding pillion riding, but," and he winked "I have not seen that piece of paper."

"An order came out in Iraq," said I, clutching the reverend waist, "That Brigadiers were to learn to ride pillion. What is considered good enough for a Brigadier is generally far too good for me!"

What grand sports all these padres are, I thought. I never met one who did not live right up to the Golden Rule, and no humbug about it either.

He took me to the main highway to Cairo. I had not walked more than a hundred yards of the two hundred miles — it was fairly hot — when a truck pulled up.

"What about a lift, Aussie?"

"Thank you, Springbok," I answered, noting the carroty band on the driver's epaulette. "Would you mind telling me how you know I am an Aussie?"

The lad chuckled. "Heard you swimming at the Y," said he.

We rattled along the bitumen road beside a narrow canal. Palm trees and sugar canes on each side, here and there a village of squat mud huts. We whizzed past a heavily-loaded felucca, its sails furled in the absence of wind. It was drawn like a barge by — not a camel or a donkey — but an Arab, roped to the bow and bent almost double in his effort to haul the load. So, no doubt, had blocks of limestone been hauled for the Pyramids. And I had sometimes considered myself hard-worked!

One of the tyres blew out after a few miles, and the truck was soon surrounded by women and children advocating backsheesh. Black gowns, hoods and veils concealed everything but their laughing black eyes.

"Here, hold these nuts if you want to earn some backsheesh," said I to the nearest lass, but she drew back in fright, shaking her head until the brass oil-bottle suspended between her eyes threatened to break its moorings.

On we drove through irrigation areas and then through the wide thoroughfares of Cairo to the Sharia Kasr el Nil, where I was deposited at the Y.W.C.A. Palace, a bit hot and grubby, but well in time for my tea appointment.

In June, 1942, news from up the line was not very good. Tobruk had fallen. But we would get it back, said our wounded Tommies confidently. The Germans crossed the border into Egypt.

"It is all right," said a convalescing officer. "We are drawing them on, according to a plan worked out years ago. We'll have them out of Egypt soon."

But the sceptics were inclined to think the invasion of Egypt was a case of the old story of underestimating the enemy's strength. There was a great feeling everywhere of "Do the job in hand, don't worry about what is coming next!"

I was telephoning in the R.T.O.'s office at Kantara station when a draft of the Australian Ninth Division came through en route for the Western Desert. The doorway was filled by a large Tobruk Rat. He did not notice me.

"Aw cripes," he cried in disgust to a Tommy friend. "We have got to go up the line and do the b —— job all over again. But as soon as we have chased the b —— bees out of Africa we are b —— well going home!"

One would have thought he intended to do it single handed, by the swagger, bless him!

"Hallo, Doug." I called, recognising an ex-patient.

"Well, if it's not the old Major! Glad to see you. Sorry about the language, Doc., but I reckon what you think of Germans would probably shock me!"

"Too right it would," said I, delighted to see the boys. They had been "resting" up in Syria and were as fit as fighting cocks and dying to get into the scrap. They made their stand at el Alamein, and played their part in the Battle of Egypt. Then most of them returned to Australia to help keep out the Jap. But Doug. did not go home. . . .

Italian prisoners were being employed as hospital orderlies: happy youths who brightened the wards with their singing. A square blue patch adorned the back of each man's shorts, causing him to resemble a descendant of the Ancient Britons rather than the Romans!

They reacted differently to the news about the British retreat from Libya. One informed me naively that he hoped the British would be able to check the Germans, otherwise he would have to go and fight again! Another stopped whistling an aria as I passed

him, leaned on his broom, and remarked cheerfully—

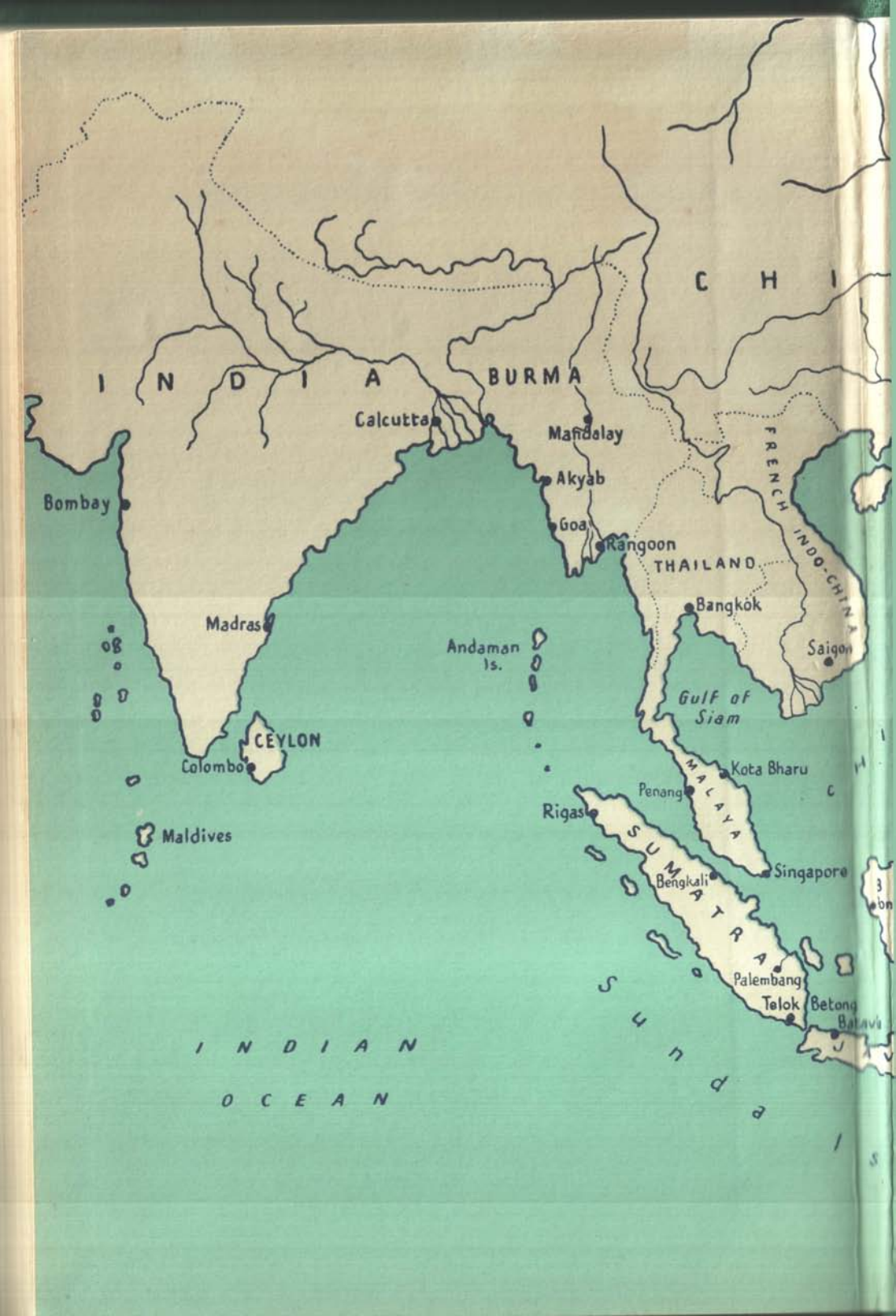
"You have been good to me, Signora. When Germans come I look after you!"

I thanked him, but pointed out that he need not bother, as the British always win the final battle!

And then the x-ray got me again, properly this time. That awful feeling of constant weariness, when moving a finger, let alone an arm or leg, calls for all the effort one can muster. I found myself on a hospital ship, on which in her tourist days I had once vomited my way across the Tasman Sea. Very trim and clean was she, white with red crosses, and staffed by New Zealanders, among whom was an old friend of Dunedin days.

I stood at the stern and watched the Tewfic monument receding as the ship turned for home.

"Just think!" I cried exultantly to a Digger lounging on some nearby steps. "We're going home!" Did that Digger click his heels to the salute? Did he speak or smile? He did none of these things. Slowly his left eyelid dropped. I could almost smell the gumleaves!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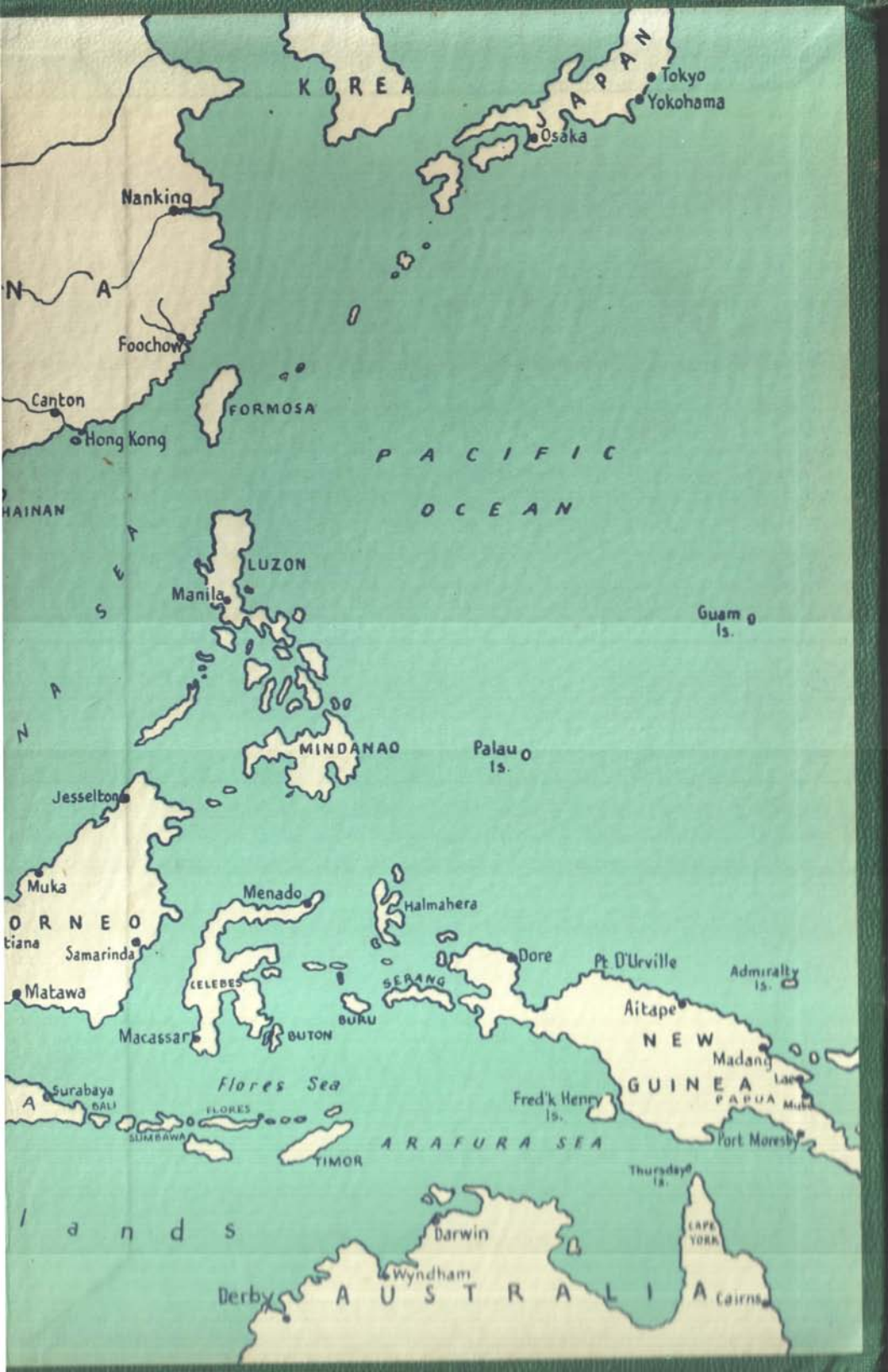
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